What If Everything Is Wrong

The Feeling

I'm not a writer, an author, a story teller or anything like that, I want to get that out of the way early. I've never written anything with any real substance in my life and this didn't begin as a plan to write a book. It started as a question. One question that turned into another, then another, then it spiralled into something I wasn't expecting. But before the question there was a feeling. And that feeling goes back a long way.

I was about ten years old, sat in the back of my mum's car on the way home from a Jehovah's Witness meeting. It was several decades ago now but it's as vivid in my mind now as it was the next day. Nobody had upset me, nobody had been mean, I hadn't been told off. But something wasn't right and I could feel it.

I wasn't part of the group and I knew it.

At that age, having been brought up in a religion, you want to be able to meet the standards. You want to be someone who stands out a little, someone who belongs. But sat in the back of that car, tears running down my face that nobody could see, I knew it wasn't ever going to happen. There were things that felt wrong. The cliques, the families who seemed to be on a higher status than others. The singing and praising God, it felt odd, is this really what God wants from us? Knocking on doors trying to convert people, It all felt wrong in some way. I just didn't have the vocabulary or life experience to even begin to explain.

I didn't have the words. But I had the feeling, and that feeling has stayed with me ever since.

This isn’t an attack of a religion, it's an experience of one, what it's like to be born into one. Most religions I can't tell you what thats like, but this one I can, as it is my personal experience growing up. We went to meetings three times a week. Sunday mornings, Tuesday evenings, Thursday evenings. I'll be honest, I dreaded it. It would play on my mind all day just knowing it was coming. I didn't dislike anyone, in fact I've always liked pretty much everyone I've met, but at six, seven, eight years old it wasn't something to get excited about.

There are phrases that stick with you though. "Bad association spoils useful habits." I heard that one a lot. And as a kid you take it seriously because you don't know any better. But I had mates outside the faith who were nice, friendly, decent lads. They didn't go to meetings but there was nothing wrong with them. So who was making the ruling? Who decided they were a bad association?

Then there was Armageddon, just around the corner. The end of the world was coming soon and you needed to be ready. Telling a child that does something to them. You don't process it the way an adult might. You just carry it.

At school I'd be told once a week I couldn't go to assembly because they sang religious songs. I'd make out like I was a rebel. "I'm not going to that, it's boring." Then I'd walk off in a different direction while everyone stared. They looked shocked every week and I found that quite funny, but underneath it I was being separated, marked as different, I didn't choose that. Christmas and Birthdays were a struggle as they weren't celebrated and basically ignored. One time, I must have been about nine, I knew it was coming before I even got to school on the first day back. "What did you get for Christmas?" At nine years old, trying to explain why we didn't celebrate it when I really understand the explanation myself isnt a good option. So I told my mates I got a metal detector. I'd forgotten I'd said it when my friend Peter came round one day and started pestering me to see it. I walked him to the shed, opened the door, pointed at the strimmer, and shut the door again fairly quickly. That seemed satisfactory to Peter because it was never mentioned again.

It's funny looking back, but a kid shouldn't have to blag his way through a Monday morning.

I found out about the blood thing early on. Black pudding was a huge no no and to this day I still don't like it being anywhere near my plate. But this went beyond food. You'd hear stories about Witnesses refusing blood transfusions, people making that choice for their children. We were reassured there were better alternatives anyway, but as a child it was concerning. You didn't fully understand it, you just knew it was serious.

Then one day I got kicked in the stomach by a horse and landed on a rock on my left shoulder. They took me to hospital and suspected I'd ruptured my spleen. The curtains got pulled around me and I could hear the murmur of adults talking just out of earshot. The discussions had begun. My dad was not in the religion. My mum had joined shortly after my sister was born, roughly a year before I was born. She'd been introduced to it by her older sister who had been a Witness for several years. My aunt is the epitome of matriarchy, the oldest of five siblings with my mum being the youngest, and I think that dynamic mattered. There was an already established trust in her big sister's judgment. My mum is lovely, always has been, though she is highly strung and I'm not at all, but these things tend to rub off on you.

My dad on the other hand is a nutcase, I love them both unconditionally but there's no escaping he's a bit nuts. Can't sit still, interrupts you when you're talking, was a big drinker for many years, every night basically, and he'd often land himself in trouble. He was annoyed about someone one day and was telling me what they'd done, somehow he managed to merge "you don't shit on your own doorstep" and "cutting your nose off to spite your face" into "you don't shit on your own face."

Another time we'd gone to Bulgaria to look at buying a cheap house to renovate and sell, we were looking at a town called Balchik and my dad could not remember the name at all, so I said just remember "ball itch" that might help, so that night we were chatting to someone and he was telling them about this house he'd seen, he turned to me and said what's the town called son? Itchy Bollocks? That's my dad in a nutshell. But my sister and I loved it when he was drunk, he was always very silly and made us laugh when we'd sneak downstairs and steal some of his chips he'd bought on the way home.

Anyway where was I? In the hospital they scanned me in the end, I remember the jelly on my belly before the scan. A few hours later, maybe even the next day, they confirmed it wasn't ruptured. Panic over. When it boils down to it, I honestly don't think my dad would have stood for the no blood transfusion. And actually that was a bit of a get out for my mum because ultimately she could say it was out of her control. But who knows. I'm glad we never had to find out.

The next day I was still in hospital and the curtains got pulled around me again. I could hear the murmur of chatter so I decided to give my dad a bit of his own medicine. He was always winding us up so as the curtains came open I pretended to have a fit. I heard my dad scream, "What's up with him doc?" At which point I burst out laughing.

He got his own back though and probably doesn't even realise it. The next day, I'm guessing my mum had gone to a meeting, so my dad was the one to pop in and see me. He turned up with two of his mates. All three of them were pissed. That upset me, or more accurately it really irritated me.

In that one evening you've got a snapshot of my life, mum's at a Jehovah's witness meeting, dad had been in the pub. And I'm in a hospital bed somewhere between two worlds that don't fit together.

By thirteen, knocking on doors had become genuinely embarrassing. Walking around in a suit and tie with a briefcase was not the image you wanted people from school to see. I'd also met a girl. I'd actually spotted her on my very first day at a new secondary school and even snuck a look at the register to try and remember her name. At that point I was locked in. A few weeks of trying to say hello, before I knew it we were walking home from school together. She lived pretty close. After an awful lot of hinting we got together. So when I was told I should break up with her, the idea was just absurd. That was the line. I'd also been getting into trouble with the elders by that point. I even remember one of them saying, "Why do you bother coming here?" Which actually kept me going a little longer just to spite him.

But by sixteen I'd moved out. My best mate was eighteen, we had the chance to share a flat, and I'd just got a job. So that was that really. No big dramatic exit, no falling out, just leaving.

At nineteen I met my wife. We talked about it a few times over the years. I remember telling her I couldn't live up to the expectations. It wasn't that I didn't believe what I'd been taught, not at that point anyway. I hadn't really questioned it that deeply. It just felt wrong and the idea of being someone who enthusiastically goes out spreading the good word was just not me. I knew I was wasting my time. And probably annoying God more by going than by staying away.

I didn't reject the ethics, more that I rejected the performance of it. I just didn't know yet that there was a difference.

For the next decade or so I got on with life. From twenty to thirty it was all about family and business, 3 kids to bring up when really I was just a kid myself. I started things, some worked, some didn't, but I always had something on the go. That felt like my calling. Start a great business, make some money, have a nice life.

Then I stumbled into something called horse racing trading and quickly went from making a few hundred quid a week to a couple of grand a month. At one point I paid myself eight thousand for the month. Ten years ago that was a decent chunk. I spent it on a few nice things for the apartment and going out. But I wasn't any happier than when it was fun making fifteen hundred a month. I was able to say to my wife, if you're not happy at work, retrain. Go do something completely different. She agreed, started teaching beauty, then went back to university to study education. She now has a job she absolutely loves and is two years away from becoming a doctor of education. So good things came out of it. Being able to help the kids at uni and treat them when they were back was very nice too.

But personally, something was still missing.

I'd struggled with terrible hangovers all my life, to the point where a night out would mean three days of feeling awful. So the drinking had to stop. I tried non-alcoholic beer,I tried kava, it's some stuff you had to brew for ages that tasted horrible and did absolutely nothing. I just wanted to be able to sit in a bar and feel relaxed. That was it. Two pints relaxed, not ten pints falling over. Eventually I made a bad call, I found my way onto the dark web, bought some bitcoin for about three hundred quid, and ordered Xanax from Silk Road. I'd never heard of it at that point. It came up as an alternative to alcohol while I was googling, something to take the edge off. There were warnings about addiction but I'd quit drinking and given up smoking at twenty one so I wasn't worried. It worked at first. I was relaxed. But I couldn't remember most of the night before. Completely blank. Then the next batch were fake. Then the real ones came back but it wasn't the two pints relaxed I was after. It was the ten pints stumbling around version. And then one evening I came home to find my wife had taken one of them after a fair amount of wine. She could barely talk. I couldn't sleep so I got on the couch and checked on her every hour until morning. She was of course very apologetic but she got a frosty reception when I told her that I thought she might have been dead.

Into the bin with them.

I'd obviously heard about meditation. It seemed a bit ridiculous to me honestly, but I thought "what have I got to lose?" I just wanted to be able to sit still and be present. That was the whole ambition.

The change after one session was remarkable. A Buddhist monk guided it, she was wonderful. I could just sit and take a moment while listening to what she said. And something shifted. The next time I met up with friends and family I was different. I could listen to other people, be genuinely interested in what they had to say, ask questions, let a conversation grow from wherever it went. I was relaxed. I had a lovely afternoon.

I went regularly for about six weeks and found my mind was a much clearer place. Then the monk who'd been leading the sessions moved on. Someone new took over. I couldn't focus,

all I could do was compare the two. When you've had someone who operates on a different level to the one currently guiding you it just becomes an argument in your head. One side saying ‘the other one was better’ and the other side saying ‘shut up I'm trying to meditate’. So unfortunately that was the end of that.

But something from it stayed with me. Even after I stopped going, the restlessness had a different shape to it. I wasn't just drifting any more, I was looking for something, I just didn't know what yet.

A few years earlier I had got into politics for the first time. I'd always thought they were all the same. Watching documentaries about Thatcher, Blair, Bush and Regan had given me a particular distaste for the whole business.

I'd been watching documentaries for years. Since I was about thirty. Netflix back then wasn't the Netflix we have now. It was obscure films and loads of documentaries, closer to what YouTube is now. I'd hunt through it every night. The one that stands out most was a documentary, I think there were three in the end, and the first one talks about Horus the Egyptian sun god and questions the Bible by showing how different cultures share the same themes. The creation. The first couple. The serpent. The flood. The messiah figure. I'd never heard any of this in the Kingdom Hall so it opened my eyes to start asking more questions.

Then came documentaries about corruption, big pharma, politics, 9/11. All questioning the narratives. I remember being around thirty three and watching something about banking and global finance on YouTube and thinking this has gone too far now, this feels like it's veering into something ugly. So I switched it off and went back to more mainstream stuff. Adam Curtis on the BBC. Michael Moore. Journalism that can be verified. Over the years I'll admit I've looked back at some of these things to try and disprove them with my ‘I know better’ hat on, some easy to dismiss but others in all honesty aren't.

I remember telling someone "oh Walt Disney he’s an antisemite , they said “ is he? Why did he do? “ and actually I didn't know, I'd just assumed it, based on vague references. I thought to myself if I'm making a statement like that in future I need to know what I'm talking about, so quite often in conversations I'd hold my tongue, even though it was clear to me most people haven't really got a clue on most topics either.

When Covid happened there was no horse racing for months. Stuck in the house with a burning desire to do something. So I went back to university and did a degree. I lasted one year but finished top on almost every assignment bar one or two. The problem was it was three years long and I had the itch to start a business. One that was quite personal to me.

The plan had been for my wife to finish her Masters and then we'd move to Thailand. Sell the house. I'd set up a little business to keep me busy and we'd live out there. But this idea wouldn't leave me alone. So we put Thailand on hold, sold the house, and off I went.

The business now is brilliant but the first two years were brutal. Eight to twelve hour days, every day. It broke me at some point and my spark had gone. I was exhausted. But people loved it and the people who came were all really lovely. I met hundreds of them over a couple of years and some became more like friends. That's a big part of what got me through.

Something wouldn't let it close. Partly me, but I know for sure it wasn't just me.

My mum was in and out constantly, cleaning, painting, making the place look as nice as it could on no budget. My wife stepped in and started doing the six am starts so I could get a bit more sleep. My dad the same, if something needed fixing and he could see I was struggling he'd just turn up saying come on I'll help you. Nobody asked them to. They just did it.

My best friend now lives a good way away about 3 hour drive so I don't see him anywhere near as much as i'd like but he said to me one day when I was obviously struggling, "mate if anyone can make this work, it's you", I don't think anyone will ever understand how important that sentence was.

Without these wonderful people and the new ones I was meeting through the business I couldn't have got through it. And I'm not someone who says that lightly. I went in thinking I could handle anything. No wages for eighteen months, very little sleep but I was broken within twelve. But between the people who walked through the door and the family who wouldn't let me fall, it held together. Just about.

After two years it got easier. It got to break even then profitability. We were able to automate large parts which meant I had much more time for myself.

But the final straw for me mentally was the investors. I spent two to three years looking for institutional investment to roll the concept out. I got absolutely nowhere, ignored, strung along and generic responses to applications. After I got back from a month in away last year I said that's enough. If we grow the business it'll be organic. If someone rang up tomorrow and offered a hundred grand I'd say no thanks and I'd mean it.

It was liberating, but it made me ask the question. If not me then who? I found out that ninety three percent of investors have never even started a company. When they invest it's in kids from Cambridge, Oxford, Stanford and Harvard with a sprinkle of PhDs and finance backgrounds. I never stood a chance. That annoyed me, not so much the rejection. The dishonesty. Be upfront, don't waste two years of someone's life letting them knock on a door that was never going to open.

That led me to asking who holds the power and who runs the show, then that led me to asking where it all started, not just the money, not just the politics. The whole thing. The beliefs underneath it. Where did they come from? Who decided them? And why do we never question any of it?

One evening I sat down and started really exploring religion. I was looking into where certain beliefs originated. Not what people claim to believe but where those ideas actually came from. I found something that didn't match what I'd been told. Then I found another thing then

another. By two in the morning I was reading about a religion I'd never heard of that appeared to have shaped everything.

I started reading about an ancient text, buried in the Egyptian desert for over sixteen hundred years, that contains a line I didn't read until much later in the night. But when I found it, it described exactly what had happened to me.

"Seek and don't stop until you find. When you find you'll be disturbed. When you're disturbed you'll be amazed."

I was disturbed, I was amazed, and I haven't been able to stop since.

The Straight and Narrow

I was lucky enough to be brought up in a small town in north Wales, my parents moved there when I was about five and a year later they bought a lovely big house that became a bed and breakfast, eventually they bought the field behind it and it became a horse riding stables too. Now my parents are working class but my dad's a grafter, he's been a carpet fitter all his life and that always kept us afloat. My mum ran the B&B and the stables while my dad was out fitting carpets and between them they made it work, or at least they tried to.

I'm not sure of the full ins and outs but at about eleven years old things weren't going great, interest rates were high and I've a vague memory of being told they needed to pay a mortgage that was around a thousand pounds a month, now in the late eighties that was a lot of money and my dad just couldn't keep up. Not that they didn't try, at some stage he got banned from driving so my mum would drive the van so he could carry on working, but it was just too much to sustain and eventually the place was repossessed by the bank.

I couldn't fully understand it but I knew it wasn't right. How can they just keep asking for more and more money until it becomes impossible to pay and then just take it all back? There was something fundamentally wrong with that and even a kid knows it. So let's say I never had any love for banks and financial institutions going into adulthood, that feeling was already locked in before I'd left school.

By eighteen I'd formulated a plan, hadn't really thought it through properly but I was doing it nonetheless. If you're Gen Z or a millennial you'll find this hard to believe but in the nineties we had cheque books and on the bank card there was something called cheque guarantee, usually around a hundred pounds, which meant the bank would guarantee that cheque was paid up to that amount. Bear in mind a cheque book had around thirty blank cheques in it so technically each one was worth up to three thousand pounds.

My plan was to open four bank accounts with four separate banks and see what happened, all four sent me a bank card, cheque books and a hundred pound guarantee on every one of them. My mind was blown, technically I had twelve thousand pounds for a few hours just walking around opening accounts.

This was a pivotal moment for me because there were two ways I could play it, use them responsibly and always have access to money if I needed it, or go hell for leather and rinse them for as much as I could. I chose the rinse option.

My first stop was London, my girlfriend at the time was staying there for a few weeks and asked if I wanted a trip down, I said yeah. Strangely enough there was a big supermarket next door with a help booth. I approached and said I don't suppose you cash cheques, yes she said but you'll need a cheque guarantee card, great I said and placed it on the counter, hundred pounds cash handed over just like that. Next day I was down Oxford Street buying things for around a hundred quid a time, great stuff I thought, this is brilliant.

Now over the next few weeks I discovered something else, supermarkets had just started offering cashback and I realised as long as the account had at least ten pounds in it on a

Friday the money you charged wouldn't come out till Monday at the earliest, and they only checked if the account had money in it not how much, so I'd buy a pack of chewing gum on a Friday evening and ask for fifty pounds cashback, worked every time. You could do this once per card so on came the scramble driving round as many supermarkets as possible for a few weekends in a row.

The cheque thing went on for months, obviously every account was heavily overdrawn by this point so it got nerve wracking writing one, they had a phone number to call and check but nobody ever did. Eventually though I got caught writing cheques in a travel agent for currency, I'd done this quite a lot but a message had gone round and the police were called.

It spiralled out of control like most things did and to be honest I bought a car but other than that I can't really say where it all went, just squandered. I had one rule while I was doing it though, banks and big companies only, there was no way I was walking into a local shop and writing a cheque that could bounce. I'm not saying I was principled but in my mind these institutions could handle it, it wasn't going to bankrupt them that's for sure, and like I said I'd had no love for them since I was a kid watching my parents lose everything. By the time it reached court I was twenty years old, I'd got a job in a hotel and my girlfriend was about to have our baby, she had a child from another relationship and I also had a one year old from another relationship. It was chaos, my ex didn't want me in her life so I had to fight through the courts just to see my child, and I was anxious every day for about a year wondering how it would all play out. I was assigned to crown court and told I could get up to ten years in prison, but the probation officer I spoke to must have seen something because she said he's genuinely remorseful and he's really making steps to make amends, I got the maximum allowable for community service which I think was around two hundred hours.

I'm not telling you this because I'm proud of it, I'm telling you because it's honest and because it shows something about how trust works. A system that took my parents' house and called it business, But I took some back from the system and it was a crime, and I'm not saying I was right, it wasn’t, but the imbalance is hard to ignore. When you've seen that up close before you're even old enough to vote it changes how you look at everything that comes after. After the court case that was it for me, straight and narrow from there on out. I'd open a business and get down to work, that was the plan and I stuck to it. Through my twenties I genuinely thought I had it all figured out, I knew the path and nothing was going to stop me, I was going to build something, make it work and that would be that.

Then I turned thirty and the financial crisis hit at the exact same time. My business went from fifty thousand in turnover a month to about twelve thousand in the space of months, it really was that dramatic, and we had small margins so it was impossible to see a way out. The same institutions that had taken my parents' house in the eighties had now crashed the entire economy through reckless lending and gambling with other people's money, and it was ordinary people picking up the pieces again. Different decade but the same pattern. Fortunately I'd discovered horse racing trading by that point so I had an income, I'm not going to go into the ins and outs of it because that's a whole book on its own but it's basically trading the direction of a horse's price similar to how people trade currency or commodities, fast paced stuff, five minutes before a race you're in, the race starts and you're done and on to the next one. By the time the business closed I was more interested in that anyway so the landing was softer than it might have been.

But something shifted when I hit thirty. My twenties had been all confidence, all certainty, I knew what I was doing and where I was going. My thirties turned out to be the opposite, a slow realisation that I actually knew nothing, about finance, about how the world really works, about any of it.That realisation didn't knock me down it made me determined to fill in the gaps, I wanted to understand why the same things kept happening, why the people at the top kept getting bailed out while the people at the bottom kept getting cleaned out, and why nobody seemed to be able to do anything about it.

That's when the documentaries started. Inside Job showed me exactly how the 2008 crash happened and who was responsible, not in some vague conspiratorial way but with names, decisions and exposed conflicts of interest laid out clearly. Enron showed me how an entire corporation could be built on lies while the people running it cashed out and the employees lost everything. Saving Capitalism and Inequality for All, both by Robert Reich who was Bill Clinton's Labour Secretary, laid out with hard data how the system has been deliberately tilted over decades to benefit fewer and fewer people. Inside Lehman Brothers put whistleblowers on camera explaining what they saw from the inside.

I watched hundreds of them over the years, and despite all of that, despite seeing the pattern laid out in documentary after documentary, I still went into starting my own company years later thinking that venture capital would be different, that investment was based on merit and if you built something good enough the doors would open. It took over two years of being ignored and strung along and that was the last lesson I needed. The system doesn't work the way they tell you it works, it never has, and once you step back and see that clearly in one area you then put it all together and understand the bigger picture.

America

All my life America has been the worlds 'superpower'' so the saying goes when America sneezes the rest of the world catch a cold, so the story is important for everything that comes after, so we will take a quick divide into the good old UIS of A

The story of America starts with people running away. Puritans on the Mayflower in 1620 fleeing religious persecution in England, thousands more in the 1630s, Catholics setting up Maryland in 1634 because they weren't safe in Protestant England, Quakers heading to Pennsylvania, French Protestants escaping Catholic France, Scots and Irish escaping poverty and English landlords, debtors, servants, people with absolutely nothing left. The common thread is simple, ordinary people trying to get away from institutions that controlled what they could believe, what they could say, what they could own and how they could live. Regular people who'd had enough.

By 1776 the colonies had grown strong enough to say we're done with this and Thomas Jefferson, thirty three years old at the time, was given the job of writing the Declaration of Independence. What he wrote is short but beautiful, "all men are created equal" with "unalienable rights" to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," the idea that nobody is born above anybody else and that freedom isn't something a government gives you, it's something you already have.

Fifty six men signed it, nearly half were lawyers, the average age was about forty four, eight were immigrants and five were entirely self taught with no formal education at all. On paper it reads like a group of people who believed in what they were signing.

Forty one of those fifty six signers owned slaves. Four of the first five presidents were slave owners. The man who wrote "all men are created equal" owned over six hundred enslaved people in his lifetime. That's all before even mentioning the fact that not a single woman was asked to sign

Jefferson is where the whole thing unravels.

He actually wrote a passage in the original draft of the Declaration condemning slavery, a hundred and sixty eight words calling it a cruel war against human nature, and it was cut. Delegates from South Carolina and Georgia wouldn't have it and northern merchants who were making money shipping enslaved people weren't keen either, so they took it out and replaced it with a vague complaint about the King stirring up trouble among the colonists. The most important moral question of the age, deleted for politics and profit. Jefferson inherited about a hundred and seventy five enslaved people through his father and his father in law and sold over a hundred and ten in his lifetime. He calculated, in his own handwriting, that he was making a four percent annual profit from the birth of enslaved children and wrote it down like a business forecast. When he died in 1826 over a hundred and fifty men, women and children were put on the auction block to pay off his debts, families split apart, some sent to cotton plantations in Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas. One of them was an eleven year old boy called Peter Fossett who later said he'd been raised believing he was free until the day he was put on an auction block and sold to a stranger.

In his entire life Jefferson formally freed seven people. Seven out of over six hundred.

So you've got a country founded on the idea that all people are equal, written by a man who owned six hundred of them, a document that originally condemned slavery but had those words cut out because the money was too good, and a set of founders the majority of whom were profiting from the very thing they claimed to stand against. This is not about judging people from two hundred years ago by today's standards. But we have to face it. They knew. Jefferson knew, he wrote the condemnation himself. They all knew what they were doing was wrong and they did it anyway because it was profitable and convenient.

And Jefferson was hardly alone ,Patrick Henry, the man who stood up in 1775 and said "give me liberty or give me death," that line became the war cry of the American Revolution. He was the first governor of Virginia after independence, a self taught lawyer and fiery speaker, by all accounts genuinely charismatic. He was also a slave owner from the age of eighteen when he received six enslaved people as a wedding present along with three hundred acres of land, and when he died in 1799 he owned sixty seven.

He knew exactly what he was. In a letter to a Quaker abolitionist called Robert Pleasants in 1773, two years before the famous speech, Henry wrote that slavery was continuing in a country "above all others, fond of liberty" and called it a "lamentable evil." Then he wrote the line that says everything, "I am drawn along by the general inconvenience of living without them. I will not, I cannot justify it, however culpable my conduct." I know it's wrong, I know I can't defend it, but I'm not willing to be inconvenienced by doing the right thing. The man shouting give me liberty or give me death wouldn't give liberty to the people in his own house, and one of them, a man called Ralph Henry, apparently took the famous words to heart and escaped to the British lines during the war.

Then there's James Madison, the "Father of the Constitution," the man who literally drafted the document that defined the American government and served as the fourth president. Madison inherited hundreds of enslaved people from his father and lived with them on his Montpelier plantation, he owned around a hundred at the time of his death in 1836 and he never freed a single one. Where Madison differs from Henry and Jefferson is that he didn't even bother with the hand wringing, no letters agonising over it, no passages condemning it that got deleted, just quiet acceptance.

The Constitution included the Three Fifths Compromise which counted enslaved people as three fifths of a person for deciding how many representatives each state got in Congress. They couldn't vote, couldn't own property, couldn't testify in court, but their existence boosted southern political power and Madison helped write that into the founding document of the country. The more people you enslaved the more seats you got..

Henry said the right things and did nothing, Madison didn't even say the right things, and both of them kept their wealth, kept their power, and kept their people.

There is one exception worth looking at and that's Alexander Hamilton. What he tried to build and what it became within a hundred years tells you everything about how institutions work.

Hamilton's background is nothing like the others. He was born around 1755 or 1757 on the island of Nevis in the Caribbean, nobody is sure of the exact year, born out of wedlock to a Scottish trader who abandoned the family when Alexander was about ten and a mother who died when he was around thirteen. He was an orphan by his early teens and went to work as a clerk at eleven years old.

He wrote a letter about a hurricane that was so impressive the locals raised money to send him to America for an education, he was about fifteen. He enrolled at what's now Columbia University, taught himself law and passed the bar exam in six months when most people took three years.

He fought in the Revolutionary War and caught Washington's eye, became his aide, and after the war became the first Secretary of the Treasury. An orphan from the Caribbean with no connections, no money and no family name who taught himself was the closest thing to a genuine outsider among the founders. He was not perfect by any means but he co-founded the New York Society for the Manumission of Slaves and helped lead the campaign to outlaw the international slave trade in New York, but he married into a family that owned enslaved people so even his hands were completely clean. Compared to the plantation owners running the south though he was in a different category, and what matters for this story is what he tried to build.

When Hamilton became Treasury Secretary in 1789 America was in a mess, massive war debt, worthless currency, no central bank, no proper tax system, no way of collecting revenue and nobody trusting the new country to pay its bills. His plan came in four reports to Congress between 1790 and 1791. The first was to pay off all the debt at full value, because the states had borrowed heavily during the war and issued IOUs that were now trading at a fraction of their face value, and Hamilton's logic was simple, if you want anyone to ever lend you money again you honour what you owe. The second was to create a national bank modelled on the Bank of England that would hold government funds, issue paper currency, make loans, collect taxes and manage the government's money, with the government owning twenty percent of the shares and private investors owning the rest. The third was a proper tax system, import duties on foreign goods and excise taxes on things like whiskey, giving the government actual income for the first time. And the fourth was to protect American manufacturing through tariffs to shield new industries from cheap British imports and subsidies to help domestic manufacturers grow, because America couldn't survive long term just exporting raw materials and buying everything back as finished goods.

Here is what makes Hamilton different from the others. He built safeguards into the system because he did not trust anyone with unchecked power, including himself. The government owned a minority stake in the bank so it couldn't become a political weapon, the Treasury could inspect the books weekly, the bank was forbidden from buying government bonds to stop it inflating its own value, and it had a twenty year charter rather than a permanent one so it would have to be reviewed.

He asked the question openly in his report to Congress, what government has ever consistently acted in its own long term interest when faced with short term temptation, and what nation was ever blessed with a constant succession of honest administrators? He knew what men do with power and he built a system to serve the country, and he warned in writing that if the safeguards were removed it would be abused. He was shot dead in a duel with the Vice President Aaron Burr in 1804 at either forty seven or forty nine depending on which birth year is correct, and some historians believe he deliberately missed his shot. His eldest son had been killed in a duel three years earlier defending his father's reputation, he was nineteen.

The bank's twenty year charter expired in 1811, Hamilton was dead, his party was out of power and the charter was not renewed. A second bank was created in 1816 but President Andrew Jackson killed that off too because he saw it as an instrument of the wealthy elite, and when he pulled all federal deposits out it triggered a financial crisis and a depression, the very thing Hamilton had warned about. With no central bank and no real oversight the door was wide open, and by the 1870s and 1880s a handful of men had taken control of entire industries. John D. Rockefeller controlled oil, Andrew Carnegie controlled steel, Cornelius Vanderbilt controlled the railways and JP Morgan controlled banking and finance. They called it the Gilded Age, beautiful on the surface and rotten underneath.

Finance

So by now you can probably understand my relationship with money and finance, it’s hard and almost unbelievable to most if I say I’m not interested in being rich, I know I need money I have to pay for things like everyone else but if I had £10m in the bank i’m convinced i’d less happy than I am now. It’s the complete opposite of what we are led to believe: more money equals more freedom which equals more happiness. So let's take a look at finance and who it actually benefits.

Just before we carry on with the financial system, though there's a story worth telling that happened about thirty years before the Mayflower even set sail, and it's one of the most ridiculous things human beings have ever done with money.

In the 1590s a botanist called Carolus Clusius brought tulip bulbs to the Netherlands from Constantinople and planted them at the University of Leiden for research. His neighbours broke into his garden, stole the bulbs and started selling them. That's how the Dutch tulip trade began, with a robbery.

Over the next few decades tulips became fashionable among the wealthy, a status symbol, something to show off in your garden. But by the 1630s it had gone well beyond fashion. The Dutch were in their Golden Age, the richest country in the world, money was everywhere, and people started speculating on tulip bulbs the way people now speculate on stocks or crypto. They developed a futures market where you could buy and sell bulbs that were still in the ground, putting down as little as 2.5% of the contract value. Sound familiar?

Between 1634 and early 1637 prices went up twentyfold. A single bulb of the rarest variety, the Semper Augustus, sold for 10,000 guilders, which was enough to buy one of the grandest canal-side homes in Amsterdam complete with a coach house and an 80 foot garden, or enough to feed, clothe and house an entire Dutch family for half a lifetime. At the peak some bulbs were selling for more than 10 times the annual income of a skilled craftsman. Ordinary people, brewers, bakers, carpenters, chimney sweeps, were mortgaging their homes to buy Tulip bulbs. One recorded transaction shows a single Viceroy bulb being traded for a bed, a suit of clothes, and among other things a thousand pounds of cheese.

Nobody was buying tulips to plant them. The bulbs were deemed too valuable to go in the ground. Wealthy buyers were displaying unplanted bulbs on their mantelpieces like ornaments. According to one popular account a sailor visiting a boarding house in Amsterdam mistook a rare bulb for an onion and ate it for breakfast, he was imprisoned for months. An English botanist dissected a bulb worth 4,000 guilders for study and was arrested until he could repay the damage, though modern historians suspect the tale is apocryphal.

In February 1637 it collapsed. An auctioneer in Haarlem couldn't find buyers despite dropping the price repeatedly. Panic spread. Within days bulbs that had sold for 5,000 guilders were going for 50. The contracts people had signed were worthless, the money they'd borrowed was still owed, and they were left holding flowers that nobody wanted.

It's the first recorded financial bubble in history and it follows the exact same pattern as every one that came after it. People see others making easy money so they pile in, prices go up because more people are piling in, everyone convinces themselves it can only go higher, and then someone asks the obvious question, they're just flowers aren't they? And the whole thing falls apart overnight.

The reason I'm telling you this isn't because it's funny, although it is, it's because this happened in 1637 and we still haven't learned a thing from it. The same cycle has repeated every time, the South Sea Bubble in 1720, the Wall Street crash in 1929, the dot com bubble in 2000, the housing crash in 2008, and the pattern never changes. Ordinary people get pulled in at the top, the people who got in early cash out, and the people left holding the bag are the ones who could least afford to lose.

By 1890 the wealthiest one percent of American families controlled fifty one percent of the nation's property, half the country owned by one percent of the people. They crushed competitors, bought politicians, exploited workers including children, created monopolies and paid wages so low that the people making them rich could barely eat. The president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, Thomas Andrew Scott, when told that striking workers were hungry, suggested they should be given "a rifle diet for a few days and see how they like that kind of bread." Hamilton attempted to build a system to serve the nation and within a hundred years it served about twelve men.

Then came 1907, and this is the one that ties it all together. In October a cascade of bank runs hit Wall Street and Main Street and within weeks the stock market lost nearly half its value while trust companies, which were less regulated than banks and held far less cash in reserve, started collapsing one after another.

JP Morgan, seventy years old by this point, summoned bank leaders to his private library on Madison Avenue, locked the doors and refused to let anyone leave until they pledged millions to keep the system afloat. He personally decided which institutions survived and which ones didn't, and the papers called him a hero. But underneath the headlines it was a different story. Morgan's bank survived while the trust companies, which had been a growing rival to traditional banks, were decimated. Some analysts believed the panic had been deliberately engineered to damage confidence in the trusts so that the established banks would benefit, and Morgan had profited from earlier panics by lending money to desperate bankers at punishing rates, so the hero was also the biggest beneficiary.

The panic led Congress to create the Federal Reserve in 1913, America's central bank, the thing Hamilton had called for over a century earlier, proper oversight of the financial system at last. Except the design came from a secret conference at the Jekyll Island Club off the coast of Georgia attended by a small group of the nation's most powerful financiers, and the first president of the most important branch, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, was Benjamin Strong, Morgan's own deputy. So the system that was supposed to stop one man

having too much power over the economy was designed in secret by the most powerful men in finance and then run by one of their own.

Hamilton built a financial system with checks and balances to prevent exactly this and he warned in writing that it would happen. Every safeguard he put in was stripped out, allowed to lapse, or worked around, and within a hundred years the system had been captured by the very type of unchecked power he tried to prevent.

So that's a bit of detail on how America, with the freedom to create its own system from scratch, went about things. I could talk about the Great Depression but it's the 2008 financial crisis that makes more sense here because many of you will remember it and it's actually a repeated pattern that if one thing is for sure will happen again.

Before we get into what happened though we need to understand how it was possible, and that means understanding some terms that sound complicated but are actually fairly simple once you strip the jargon away.

A mortgage backed security is exactly what it sounds like. A bank gives out a load of mortgages to people buying houses, then bundles all those mortgages together into one big package and sells that package to investors. The investors make money because all those homeowners are paying their mortgages every month with interest, so the returns are steady and reliable. The bank makes money because it gets paid upfront when it sells the bundle and can then go and lend that money out again to the next round of buyers. On paper it works fine, as long as the people paying the mortgages can actually afford them.

A subprime mortgage is one given to somebody who probably shouldn't have been given one in the 1st place, people with bad credit, low income, no deposit, sometimes no proof of income at all. They were called NINJA loans at one point, no income, no job, no assets. The banks gave them out anyway because they weren't keeping the risk, they were bundling these dodgy mortgages in with decent ones, packaging them up into securities and selling them on. By the time it went wrong it was somebody else's problem. A derivative is a bet on something without actually owning it. So you could bet on whether a bundle of mortgages would go up or down in value without owning any of the mortgages yourself, and people were making these bets in the billions. Some of them were even betting that the whole thing would collapse, which tells you some knew exactly what was coming.

So you've got banks handing out mortgages to people who can't afford them, packaging those mortgages into bundles and selling them as safe investments, rating agencies stamping them as triple A which is supposed to mean rock solid, and then a whole separate casino of people betting on whether the bundles would hold up or fall apart. When house prices stopped going up and people started missing payments the whole thing came down like a house of cards, because every part of it was built on the assumption that prices would keep rising forever, and that is never how it works. The whole thing burst in 2008 and because America is a world power, what happens there ripples everywhere else. Banks in the UK, Europe, Asia, all of them had bought into these mortgage bundles thinking they were safe because the rating agencies said so. Credit froze, businesses couldn't borrow, people lost their homes, lost their jobs, lost their savings. The stock market crashed, governments

had to bail out the banks with taxpayer money, and the people who felt it the most were the ones who had nothing to do with causing it. The average person on the street, trying to pay their mortgage, trying to keep their job, trying to put food on the table, they paid the price while the people at the top walked away with bonuses.

And this is where it gets properly outrageous. Larry Fink, the founder and CEO of BlackRock which is now the largest asset management firm in the world with over ten trillion dollars in assets, started his career at an investment bank called First Boston in 1976 where he was one of the first mortgage backed security traders. He helped develop and popularise the very products that would go on to poison the banking system thirty years later. He was so good at it that he added about a billion dollars to First Boston's profits before his department lost a hundred million in one quarter in 1986 because of a bad bet on interest rates. He left, co-founded BlackRock in 1988, and built it into a powerhouse focused on risk management, which is ironic given where the whole thing started.

When the 2008 crisis hit, the US government contracted with BlackRock to help manage the toxic assets from collapsed firms like Lehman Brothers and Bear Stearns. The man who helped create the instruments that caused the crisis was brought in to clean up the mess, and his firm was paid handsomely for doing it. As one report put it at the time, Fink helped popularise the same mortgage backed securities that nearly poisoned the banking system and now his firm was making millions cleaning up the toxic assets.

And while ordinary people were losing their homes and their livelihoods, BlackRock was buying up distressed assets at rock bottom prices. Property, securities, entire portfolios that had collapsed in value, all snapped up for a fraction of what they were worth. Bloomberg reported that BlackRock may never have grown as far and as fast as it did without the unprecedented changes brought about by the recession. The crisis that destroyed millions of ordinary lives was the making of BlackRock.

Today BlackRock, along with Vanguard and State Street, holds majority shares in eighty eight percent of the S&P 500 companies. Fink's net worth is estimated at over a billion dollars. He is co-chairman of the World Economic Forum and advises central banks and governments around the world. Fink helped build and throw the bomb, then got paid to clean up the rubble and then bought the land it was standing on.

We have talked about people running away, puritans on the Mayflower in 1620, Catholics, Quakers, debtors, servants, ordinary people fleeing institutions that controlled what they could believe, what they could own and how they could live. They crossed an ocean, built something new, and within a few generations the thing they built had been captured by the same kind of people they were running from. The tulip traders in Amsterdam mortgaged their homes for flowers. The bankers on Wall Street packaged bad debt and sold it as gold. The pattern never changes.

But on the 31st of October 2008, while the global financial system was collapsing and governments were handing billions of taxpayer money to the very banks that caused the crash, someone published a nine page document on a cryptography mailing list. It was called "Bitcoin: A Peer-to-Peer Electronic Cash System" and it was written by a person or

group using the name Satoshi Nakamoto. Nobody knows who Satoshi is. Nobody has ever confirmed their identity. They used British English spellings, listed their birthday as the 5th of April 1975, which some have pointed out is the same year the US government lifted the ban on private gold ownership, and gave their location as Japan. Various candidates have been put forward over the years, computer scientists, cryptographers, academics, but none have been proven and in 2024 a UK court ruled that the one man who publicly claimed to be Satoshi, Craig Wright, was not, and that he had "lied to the court extensively and repeatedly."

What the whitepaper proposed was simple in principle and revolutionary in practice. A way to send money directly from one person to another without a bank, without a government, without any institution in the middle taking a cut, controlling the flow, or deciding who gets access. No central authority. No permission needed. No one person in charge.

On the 3rd of January 2009, Satoshi mined the first ever Bitcoin block, known as the genesis block. Embedded inside it, permanently and unchangeably written into the code, was a message. It was a headline from that day's edition of The Times newspaper in London. It read: Chancellor on brink of second bailout for banks.

This was a statement , while the Chancellor was preparing to hand more public money to the institutions that had just burned the economy to the ground, Satoshi was quietly launching an alternative, a financial system that couldn't be debased, couldn't be inflated on a whim, couldn't be controlled by any government or central bank, and couldn't bail out anyone because there was nobody at the top to make that call. The total supply was capped at 21 million coins, hard coded, no exceptions, no printing press, no quantitative easing.

Satoshi mined roughly 1.1 million bitcoins in those early days. At today's prices that's worth tens of billions of dollars but what's strange is not one has ever been moved. Whoever Satoshi is, they built the thing, walked away and eventually became one of the wealthiest people on the planet. The last public message was posted in December 2010, and then silence. Now just think about that for a moment. In a world where every founder cashes out, every inventor patents, every creator monetises, someone built one of the most consequential financial tools in modern history and disappeared without taking a penny.

Now whether Bitcoin lives up to its promise is another question entirely and I'm not here to tell you to buy it or sell it or do anything with it, but the parallel is hard to ignore. Four hundred years ago people got on boats and crossed an ocean to escape a system that had been captured by the powerful and built to serve the few. In 2009 someone sat at a computer and built a new financial system for the same reason. The settlers couldn't fix the institutions they were fleeing so they left and started again. Satoshi couldn't fix the banks so they built something outside the banks entirely. The question is whether this one gets captured too or was always intended to be captured. Because if this book has taught you anything so far, it's that the pattern never stops. Someone builds something good, It works, people gather around it then the wrong people show up.

Larry Fink's BlackRock now runs the largest Bitcoin exchange traded fund in the world and that's not the only familiar name. As of early 2026, the biggest holders of Bitcoin look like this: Satoshi Nakamoto still sits at the top with roughly 1.1 million coins worth around $77 billion, untouched since 2010. Below that, BlackRock's iShares Bitcoin Trust holds around

769,000 coins. MicroStrategy, now rebranded as Strategy, holds over 700,000. Fidelity holds around 200,000. The US government holds over 200,000, mostly seized from criminal operations. Even the Chinese government holds an estimated 15,000 despite banning crypto entirely. Grayscale holds 187,000. The top 100 wallet addresses control nearly 15% of the entire supply, and wallets holding over 100 coins, which is the top 0.03% of all addresses, control over 60% of all Bitcoin in existence.

A currency designed so that no central authority could control it is now overwhelmingly held by central authorities, asset managers, governments and corporations. The thing that was built to bypass Wall Street is now Wall Street's favourite product. Which brings us back to the question nobody can answer. Who is Satoshi Nakamoto?

Here are the candidates. Nick Szabo, an American computer scientist who created a concept called "bit gold" in the late 1990s that looks remarkably like Bitcoin's blueprint. The New York Times once wrote that the most convincing evidence pointed to him. He denies it. Hal Finney, a cryptographer who received the very first Bitcoin transaction from Satoshi and lived a few blocks from a man literally called Dorian Satoshi Nakamoto. Writing analysis found Finney's style was the closest match to Satoshi's of anyone tested. He denied it until his death in 2014. Dorian Prentice Satoshi Nakamoto, a Japanese-American engineer in California who Newsweek put on their front cover in 2014 claiming he was the one. He said he'd never even heard of Bitcoin before reporters turned up at his house. Peter Todd, a Canadian developer named in an HBO documentary in 2024 based on forum timestamps and coding patterns. He called the theory ludicrous. Craig Wright, an Australian who publicly claimed to be Satoshi in 2016, spent years in court insisting on it, and in 2024 was told by the UK High Court that he had "lied to the court extensively and repeatedly" and was not Satoshi. He was later given a suspended prison sentence for contempt of court. Adam Back, a British cryptographer whose Hashcash system is directly referenced in the Bitcoin whitepaper. He denies it. And there are others, Wei Dai, James Donald, Len Sassaman, Paul Le Roux, each with their own thread of circumstantial evidence and none with proof.

Now here's where I want to be honest with you because this is a book about questioning everything and I'm not about to stop now. The version of Bitcoin that most people believe in is the romantic one. A lone genius or a small group of principled cypherpunks, disgusted by the 2008 crash, builds a financial system outside the control of governments and banks, gives it to the world and disappears without taking a penny. That's a beautiful story and it might be true.

But there's another version and it deserves to be heard even if it's uncomfortable. The SHA-256 hashing algorithm that Bitcoin runs on was developed by the NSA in 2001. In 1996, twelve years before the Bitcoin whitepaper, NSA staff published a research paper called "How to Make a Mint: The Cryptography of Anonymous Electronic Cash" that laid out a blueprint remarkably similar to what Bitcoin became. The CIA director William Burns publicly confirmed in 2021 that the agency had active crypto related projects. Tucker Carlson said at a Bitcoin conference in 2024 that he believed the CIA created Bitcoin, and while plenty of people laughed at him, nobody could actually disprove it. Some have pointed out that the name Satoshi Nakamoto in Japanese, surname first, could be loosely translated as "central intelligence." Others have noted that the letters can be rearranged into "I am a host to NSA ok." These are word games and I know that, but the point is nobody knows.

Was Bitcoin created by someone with good intentions, someone who wanted to give ordinary people an escape from a financial system that had just robbed them blind? Or was it created by a state with ulterior motives, a tool dressed up as liberation that actually gives governments and intelligence agencies a transparent, traceable, permanent record of every financial transaction ever made? A system where every single coin movement is logged on a public ledger forever, sold to the public as freedom but functioning in practice as the most comprehensive financial surveillance tool ever built?

I don't know the answer. Nobody does, and that's the point. We are told to trust systems built by people we can't identify, for reasons we can't verify, and we do it because the story put out sounds good.

One thing that is fact is that a currency that was supposed to take power away from institutions is now held overwhelmingly by institutions. BlackRock, Fidelity, governments, corporations, the same names you see everywhere else in this book. Whether Satoshi was a visionary, a group of academics, a state with ulterior motives, the outcome is the same. The thing got built, the thing got captured, and the people it was supposed to liberate are once again on the outside looking in.

Education

As I've mentioned I was there in my twenties thinking I knew plenty, thinking I had it figured out, only to realise by the time I hit thirty that I actually knew nothing, or at least nothing of any particular use. The business had collapsed, the financial crisis had wiped out what was left, and I found myself asking why I was at thirty years old finding out things I should have known years ago. Basic things. How money actually works. How the system around me is set up. Why certain things keep happening to ordinary people while the people at the top seem to land on their feet every time.

So ask yourself, because I can't speak for everyone, but were you taught about taxation at school? Not the word taxation, the actual mechanics of it, how much of your income goes where, what your employer pays on top before you ever see a penny, what council tax is really funding, what national insurance actually covers. Were you taught how government works, not the nice version with a diagram of Parliament but the real version, how lobbying works, how political donations influence policy, how a bill becomes law and who benefits from the ones that pass? Were you taught how corporations operate, what a shareholder is, why a company might announce record profits the same week it lays off a thousand people, how share prices affect your pension without you ever being told? Were you taught about credit, how interest compounds, what a credit score is, how easily you can wreck yours at eighteen and spend the next decade paying for it? Were you taught about mortgages, how they actually work over twenty five years, what the bank really makes from you, what happens when rates go up and your monthly payment jumps by hundreds? Were you taught about insurance, what you actually need versus what's a waste of money, how the whole industry is built on the assumption that most people won't read the terms?

Were you given any careers advice that was genuinely useful? I remember sitting in front of someone for about fifteen minutes who asked me what I was interested in and then pointed me vaguely in a direction that may as well have been picked at random. There was no conversation about starting a business, about self employment, about what industries were growing, about what skills would actually be valuable in ten years. It was pick something from this list and off you go and good luck.

But algebra. Algebra was vital apparently. Quadratic equations, that was going to see you through. And I'm not saying maths isn't important because it obviously is, but when you're teaching a sixteen year old how to solve for X while not teaching them how to read a payslip or understand a tax code you have to ask yourself what the actual purpose of this system is and who benefits from a population that can pass an exam but can't navigate the financial world they're about to be thrown into.

And then there's the uniform. Shirt, tie, blazer, black shoes. We dress children up like little office workers from the age of eleven and nobody questions it. Who decided a tie was essential to learning? What does it actually do other than teach compliance from a young age? You will dress how we tell you. You will sit where we tell you. You will learn what we tell you. And when you leave here you will slot into a workplace that expects the same thing and you won't even question it because you've been doing it since you were five.

I'm not saying teachers are the problem because most of the teachers I've come across are brilliant people who genuinely care about the kids they teach and do an incredible job despite being underfunded, overworked and buried in paperwork that has nothing to do with actually educating anyone. The problem is the system they're working inside, and to understand why the system is the way it is you have to look at how it started.

Before the 1800s there was no national education system in England at all. Only a tiny fraction of children received any schooling and what existed was almost entirely run by the church or set up by wealthy benefactors. Grammar schools went back to Tudor times, funded by merchants, teaching Latin and Greek to boys destined for the priesthood or the law. The great public schools like Eton and Harrow were financially out of reach to anyone except the ruling class. For poorer children there were charity schools and dame schools, usually run by old women or retired soldiers who taught basic reading, writing and arithmetic for small fees. For centuries education in England was either religious training or a privilege for the rich, and the vast majority of children got nothing at all.

The Industrial Revolution changed things, but not for the reasons you'd hope. Britain was being transformed by factories, mills and mines and the population was exploding, but children were part of the workforce, not the classroom. By 1850 it was clear the country wasn't investing in its people and the schools that existed, still mostly belonging to the churches, couldn't provide enough places or a proper education. So why did the government finally act? Three reasons, all documented. First, industrialists wanted workers who could read instructions, follow processes and operate machinery, and they lobbied Parliament hard on the basis that mass education was vital to Britain maintaining its lead in manufacturing. Second, Germany was seen as a serious rival and it was widely believed that their industrial success was down to their education system, Prussia having had compulsory primary education since the 1760s while Britain had nothing. And third, the voting franchise was being expanded and politicians were nervous about uneducated people having a say, with one MP warning Parliament in 1867 that they should "prevail on our future masters to learn their letters."

The 1870 Education Act was the first piece of legislation to deal specifically with education in England and Wales. It set up board schools in areas where there weren't enough but it didn't make attendance compulsory everywhere and parents still had to pay fees. Compulsory attendance for ages five to ten didn't come until 1880 and even then truancy was rampant because families couldn't afford to lose the income their children earned. Fees weren't abolished until 1891. The school leaving age was raised to fourteen in 1918 and it wasn't until 1944 that free secondary education for all was finally established.

The purpose of the system, and this is where the historical record is quite clear, was summed up by the historian R.H. Tawney who wrote that the education system aimed at producing "an orderly, civil, obedient population, with sufficient education to understand a command." Elementary schools were founded for working class children to maintain the existing social order. The rich had their public schools and their universities. Everyone else got just enough to be useful and not enough to be dangerous.

And this connects to something that I think gets overlooked. As the state gradually took over education from the church, as children spent more of their formative years in a system designed by government rather than one designed by clergy, something shifted. We slowly stopped being a particularly religious nation.

The numbers tell the story clearly. UK church membership was around 10.6 million in 1930, roughly thirty percent of the population. By 2010 it had dropped to 5.5 million, about eleven percent. Church attendance fell from 6.5 million in 1980, nearly twelve percent of the population, to just over 3 million by 2015, about five percent. The Church of England's own numbers nearly halved between 1983 and 2014, from 16.5 million identifying as Anglican to 8.6 million. Meanwhile people with no religious affiliation nearly doubled in the same period, from 12.8 million to 24.7 million. By the 2021 census Christianity had fallen below half the population for the first time.

Now is that a coincidence? Is it just that people naturally drifted away from religion as the world modernised? Maybe. But consider this. For centuries the church controlled education and the population was overwhelmingly religious. Then the state took over, redesigned the system around its own needs, and within a few generations the country went from one of the most religious in Europe to one of the least. Whatever you were taught as a child, whatever system shaped your thinking in those formative years, that is what sticks. The church knew it, which is why they fought so hard to keep control of education. The state knew it, which is why they eventually took it.If you want to shape what a population believes, you don't need to preach to adults. You just need to decide what their children are taught.

I'm not an expert in this subject but it just so happens I know one, my wife is two years away from becoming a doctor of education and when I told her what I was writing this she had plenty to say about it, and she's far more qualified than I am on this subject so I'm going to let her expertise do the talking here.

Teaching in this country was originally a male profession. When women began entering it in large numbers during the Victorian era, something happened that will surprise no one. The pay dropped, female teachers were paid significantly less than their male counterparts from the start, and organisations like the National Union of Women Teachers had to campaign for decades just to get anywhere close to parity. Equal pay in teaching wasn't agreed until 1961, and even then it was introduced gradually. So the moment women entered the profession in numbers, the profession was valued less. The work didn't change, the children didn't change, the only thing that changed was who was doing it.

But the pay wasn't the worst of it. From the late 1800s through to the middle of the twentieth century, local authorities across Britain operated what was called the marriage bar. If a female teacher got married she was required to resign. If she was already married she could be sacked. A senior British judge said in 1925 that "the duty of a married woman is primarily to look after her domestic concerns and it is impossible for her to do so and to effectively and satisfactorily act as a teacher at the same time." That was the law. A woman could dedicate years of her life to training and to the children in her care, but the moment she wanted a family of her own she was out. Eighty percent of women teachers automatically resigned on

marriage because they had no choice. Some got around it by marrying in secret and living apart from their husbands. Some had engagements that lasted years because they couldn't afford to lose their income.

One woman, Joan Stacey, was engaged and facing the prospect of giving up her career when the marriage bar was finally lifted by the 1944 Education Act. By the time the law changed her fiance had been killed in the Second World War and she spent the rest of her life teaching. She later said "it took many years for men to tolerate us women, they would scorn older women and say poor old dear she's not married." Professor Ted Wragg of Exeter University called it what it was, "pure prejudice enshrined in law."

And while the marriage bar was in full force, a breakaway union of male teachers called the National Association of Schoolmasters was arguing that because men were intellectually superior to women, women shouldn't be allowed to teach boys at all. This wasn't some fringe opinion, this was an official position of a recognised teaching union in the twentieth century in Britain.

So the institution of education, which was supposed to be about developing young minds, was itself built on the idea that half the population couldn't be trusted to do the job properly and should be punished for wanting a normal life. The marriage bar wasn't lifted until 1944. Equal pay didn't arrive until 1961. The Sex Discrimination Act preventing discrimination in promotion didn't come until 1975. And even now, in 2026, teaching remains one of the most undervalued professions in the country relative to the skill and dedication it demands.

Now i guess most people will think well it’s not like that now so wanted to find out what's actually being taught now, it’s been a while since I was in school, or more accurately how it's being measured, because this is where my wife really gets going and I can't say I blame her.

The national curriculum was introduced in 1988 under the Education Reform Act. The idea was that every child in the country would follow the same broad programme of study and be tested at regular intervals to make sure standards were being met. On the surface that sounds reasonable. In practice it created a system where it became all about the test and not the learning.

SATs, Ofsted inspections, league tables, Progress 8 scores, all of it funnels down to the same thing, how well can a child perform in a timed written exam on a specific day. My wife puts it simply and she's right, it's basically a memory test. Whoever can remember things best does better on tests, and that's no way to measure what a child actually knows or what they're capable of. A kid who can strip an engine, grow food, build a wall, code a website, care for someone who's ill, solve a problem nobody's thought of yet, that kid might score a 3 on their SATs and be written off as below average before they've even started.

Even the head of Ofsted himself, Sir Michael Wilshaw, publicly criticised the system as "one size fits all" and said it was letting down students who don't fit the academic mould. Teachers have said repeatedly that summative exams rely too heavily on memory rather than the application of knowledge and understanding. Research by UCL found that the need to achieve good SATs results shapes everything about year six, what teachers teach, how they

teach it, and how the children feel about themselves. Schools end up teaching to the test because that's what they're measured on, and the things that fall off the timetable are exactly the things that might actually engage the kids who are struggling, art, music, design, technology, cooking, sport, anything that involves doing rather than memorising.

There's a saying in education, "weighing the pig doesn't make it any heavier." You can test children every week for a year and at the end of it you haven't taught them anything, you've just measured them repeatedly and stressed everyone out in the process. The system creates data, mountains of it, spreadsheets and graphs and colour coded tracking charts, and none of it tells you whether a child is curious, kind, resilient, creative, or capable of solving a problem that hasn't been written on a whiteboard yet.

And think about what we're not teaching them. We talked earlier about how nobody teaches you about tax, mortgages, credit, how to manage money. But go further than that. Why aren't we teaching children to grow food? To generate their own energy? How does a car engine work? or these days an electric one! How to repair a boiler or even build one? Practical skills that would give people genuine independence, the ability to feed themselves, heat their homes, fix things when they break. These aren't luxuries, they're the basics of survival, and the system has no interest in teaching them because independent people are harder to control. A population that can feed itself, power itself and fix its own problems doesn't need the same institutions that a dependent population does.

Here's where it gets really insidious because the system doesn't just fail kids equally, it fails them according to how much money their parents have. School admissions in England are based primarily on where you live. Your child needs to be in a school's catchment area to have the best chance of getting a place. That sounds fair until you look at what happens to house prices around the schools with the best Ofsted ratings. Research has shown that the average house price in the catchment area of an outstanding school is around £331,000, which is 41% more expensive than a home near a school rated inadequate, a difference of roughly £96,000 just for the postcode. The London School of Economics estimated that living within the catchment of an outstanding primary school adds up to 8% to a property's value compared to similar homes just outside it. In one London borough a home in the catchment of an outstanding school cost 81% more than the average for the rest of the area.

So what happens is this. A school gets a good Ofsted rating. House prices in the catchment area go up. Wealthier families move in because they can afford the premium. The school's intake becomes more affluent. Wealthier children tend to arrive better resourced, better fed, more supported at home, with parents who have the time and education to help with homework and fight for extra provision if needed. The school performs well in the next round of tests. The Ofsted rating stays high. The house prices go up again. And the cycle continues.

Now look at the other end, a school in a poorer area gets a low Ofsted rating. The families who can afford to move away do, house prices drop or stay flat, the school's intake becomes more concentrated with children from disadvantaged backgrounds, children who are more likely to arrive with additional needs, less support at home, less access to books and resources, sometimes less access to regular meals. The school struggles and the test

results reflect the challenges. The Ofsted rating stays low or drops further, funding doesn't increase to match the need and the cycle continues in the opposite direction.

It's a self-perpetuating circle that keeps the best schools the best and the struggling schools struggling, and it has almost nothing to do with the quality of the teachers. A brilliant teacher in a school rated inadequate in one of the most deprived areas of the country is doing ten times the work of a teacher in a fully resourced outstanding school in a wealthy suburb, and getting paid the same or less for it, while being told by the data that they're underperforming. The system measures the outcome and ignores the starting point, which is exactly how you design something that looks fair on paper and is deeply unfair in practice.

One in three parents have considered moving home specifically to be near a good school. Parents are willing to pay on average nearly £29,000 extra for a property in a desirable catchment. In Kensington and Chelsea, where 67% of schools are rated outstanding, the average house price is £1.475 million. In the poorest parts of the country where schools are struggling most, you couldn't buy a garage for that. And we wonder why educational outcomes follow income so closely.

The headteacher Ruth Perry took her own life after her school was downgraded to inadequate by Ofsted. One word on a report, one judgment that reduced years of work and dedication to a single label, and it destroyed her. That tragedy sparked a national conversation about whether a system that boils complex institutions down to a single word is doing more harm than good. Ofsted has since announced plans to scrap the single headline grades, but the damage has been done for decades and the structural inequality it created in the housing market and in school funding won't disappear with a policy change

Healthcare

I haven't been in hospital much in my life and for a long time I refused to go to the GP because I didn't want to waste his time, which looking back is a very British thing to say but that was how I felt. I've mentioned one hospital visit already but there's another one that changed how I see things.

At forty six years old my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. That is something no one ever wants to hear, and my dad really struggled watching my mum go through treatment, he kept saying it should be me not her. He's probably right if we're being honest, he smoked, he drank, loves his cakes and takeaways, but my mum doesn't really do any of those things, she was always busy cleaning up or off with the Witnesses or horse riding, very active, and she still is. I often say please don't do too much but it's in her nature to keep things clean and organised and looking lovely and I don't think anyone could knock her for that.

When you hear those words, I've got cancer, it feels like you stop in time for a minute, it's almost too much to process. But this is when I saw my mum for who she really is. She's a fighter and she's unafraid. I mentioned she can be a bit highly strung but it's the little things that stress her out, when she went through treatment she was stoic and resilient and I just knew she'd beat it. I don't know why or how but it just wasn't right, it was like a bully who'd picked on the wrong person thinking they might be an easy target. About two years later after various operations and treatments she was put in remission.

I think about how much she's been there for me and how things could have been so different if it wasn't for who she is and if it wasn't for the job the NHS staff and nurses did. They saved my mum's life and didn't ask for a penny in return.

Not all institutions are bad, but not all are built the way the NHS was. And here's an interesting bit of information I only found out recently.

The NHS was started not by politicians or economists or policy experts but by a group of coal miners in a small town in South Wales called Tredegar. They set up a Medical Aid Society where workers pooled a small amount of their wages each week, a few pennies, and in return they and their families got free healthcare, a doctor, a hospital, prescriptions, the lot. The whole community is looking after each other with no profit motive and no insurance company sitting in the middle taking a cut.

A boy called Aneurin Bevan grew up in that town, his father was a miner. He saw poverty and disease up close from childhood and he saw what the Medical Aid Society could do when ordinary people decided to take care of one another. He became a politician, got elected as an MP, and when Labour won the 1945 election in a landslide after the war, the new Prime Minister Clement Attlee gave Bevan the job of creating a National Health Service. He was 47, the youngest member of the cabinet, and what he was being asked to do was take what those miners in Tredegar had built and extend it to the entire population of Britain.

He said it himself in 1948, "All I am doing is extending to the entire population of Britain the benefits we had in Tredegar for a generation or more." That's what it was. A miner's son scaling up a miner's idea to cover sixty million people.

The opposition was fierce. The British Medical Association, which represented the doctors, described the proposed service as "so grossly at variance with the essential principles of our profession that it should be rejected absolutely by all practitioners." The Conservatives voted against it at second and third readings in Parliament. Doctors were terrified of becoming government employees and losing their independence, and six months before the planned launch it looked as though the whole thing might collapse through lack of support from the medical profession.

Bevan made concessions, the biggest being that doctors could remain private contractors rather than salaried employees and could continue doing private work alongside their NHS duties. He famously said he'd won the consultants over by "stuffing their mouths with gold," which was his way of saying he let them keep their earning potential in exchange for cooperation. It wasn't elegant but it worked.

On the fifth of July 1948 the National Health Service was launched at Park Hospital in Manchester. Britain became the first western country to offer free medical care at the point of use to its entire population, not based on insurance contributions or ability to pay but funded through general taxation and available to everyone who needed it. Nurses, doctors, pharmacists, dentists and opticians were all brought together under one organisation for the first time, and over two thousand five hundred hospitals were nationalised overnight.

The first patient treated was a thirteen year old girl called Sylvia Diggory who had a serious liver condition. Bevan was there and told her it was a milestone in history, the most civilised step any country had ever taken, and she later said he was right and that she remembered it for the rest of her life.

Bevan's principles were simple. Free at the point of use, available to everyone, paid for out of general taxation, and based on need rather than ability to pay. He put it plainly when he said "no society can legitimately call itself civilised if a sick person is denied medical aid because of lack of means." That sentence should be carved into the wall of every hospital in the country.

Now at almost exactly the same time this was happening in Britain, President Harry Truman was trying to do something similar in America. In September 1945, just weeks after the war ended, Truman told Congress that millions of citizens did not have adequate access to healthcare and that the time had arrived for action. He proposed a universal national health insurance programme paid for through payroll taxes, and polls showed fifty nine percent of Americans who knew about the plan were in favour of it.

The American Medical Association killed it. They launched the most expensive lobbying campaign in American history at that point, spending one and a half million dollars, and branded universal healthcare as socialism. They produced pamphlets linking it to communism and Lenin, and they recruited eighteen hundred organisations as allies including

the American Bar Association and the American Legion. The creation of the NHS in Britain actually made things worse because it gave the AMA a real world example of state run healthcare to use as a scare story, telling Americans this is what happens when the government takes over.

Truman called it the biggest disappointment of his presidency. It wasn't until 1965, twenty years later, that President Johnson managed to get Medicare through for the over sixty fives, and he travelled to the Truman Library to sign it with Truman sitting next to him, calling him "the real daddy of Medicare." But America never got what Britain got in 1948 and to this day medical debt remains the leading cause of personal bankruptcy in the wealthiest country on earth.

Two countries coming out of the same war, both with populations who'd sacrificed enormously, both with leaders who wanted universal healthcare. In Britain the medical establishment tried to stop it and one man refused to back down. In America the medical establishment tried to stop it and won. The difference between millions of people having free healthcare and millions of people going bankrupt from medical bills came down to one stubborn miner's son from South Wales who wouldn't take no for an answer.

So what happened to this thing that Bevan built?

The cracks appeared almost immediately, costs exceeded expectations within the first few years and by 1951 charges were introduced for dentures. Bevan resigned from cabinet in protest because the principle of entirely free care was already being eroded within three years of launch. But the NHS survived and grew and for decades it was genuinely the envy of the world, a system that treated you based on what was wrong with you rather than what was in your wallet.

Then came Margaret Thatcher.

In 1982 Thatcher stood up at the Conservative Party conference and told the country "let me make one thing absolutely clear, the National Health Service is safe with us." That line helped her win re-election by a landslide. But documents released thirty years later revealed that her cabinet had actually been considering radical reform of the NHS that same year, including introducing compulsory private health insurance, and the cabinet paper itself acknowledged that some of the options "would represent the end of the NHS for the majority of the population." She faced a revolt from within her own party and backed down publicly, but the "safe with us" line wasn't a declaration of support, it was damage control.

What she actually did was go around the side. She started outsourcing non-clinical services like cleaning, catering and laundry to private contractors from 1983 onwards, which led to worse standards and is widely linked to the spread of hospital infections. She encouraged people to take up private insurance, introduced tax concessions for it, and kept raising prescription charges. Then in 1989 she created what was called the "internal market" where NHS hospitals were forced to compete against each other for patients, turning a public service into something that behaved like a business. Administration costs doubled from around six percent to twelve percent almost overnight, and when she was asked why she

personally used private healthcare instead of the NHS she said "I exercise my right as a free citizen to spend my own money in my own way, so that I can go in on the day, at the time, with the doctor I choose and get out fast."

She didn't kill the NHS but she definitely opened the door.

John Major walked through it. His Chancellor Kenneth Clarke stood up in front of the Confederation of British Industry in 1993 and described what they were doing as "privatising the process of capital investment in our key public services." He actually said it out loud. This was the Private Finance Initiative, PFI, and the idea was simple. Instead of the government borrowing money to build hospitals, which it could do cheaper than anyone else, private companies would borrow the money, build the hospital, and lease it back to the NHS for twenty five to thirty years at massively inflated rates. The NHS would stop being the owner of its hospitals and become the tenant. By 1994 Clarke was telling the CBI that the Treasury would only provide capital as a last resort, "after private finance has been explored." But progress was slow and frustrated business leaders warned that PFI could fail without more action.

Then something remarkable happened. Labour, who were supposed to be the opposition, announced they were going to rescue PFI. Their shadow Treasury minister said "this idea must not be allowed to fail, Labour has a clear programme to rescue PFI," and the rescue of PFI was included in Labour's 1997 manifesto right alongside promises to scrap the internal market. They kept PFI and broke the other promise.

Tony Blair took PFI and went all in, building over a hundred hospitals through private finance deals. For just thirteen billion pounds of actual investment the NHS was landed with a bill of over eighty billion pounds in total repayments, and that figure comes from government's own data confirmed by the IPPR think tank and the National Audit Office. Even when fully repaid the public won't own the hospitals. The first wave of PFI hospitals had on average thirty percent fewer beds than the buildings they replaced, and the annual repayments were index linked to inflation meaning they went up every year regardless of whether the NHS budget did.

To put that in perspective, Sherwood Forest Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust spent more than double on PFI repayments, forty five point eight million pounds, than it spent on drugs for patients, twenty two point six million. More money going to private finance companies than to medicine. And the PFI companies themselves made one point nine billion pounds in pre-tax profits from ninety nine NHS contracts between 2004 and 2021, with another one point zero seven billion paid out in dividends and forty seven point six million in directors' fees. We'll come back to debt in more detail later but it's worth sitting with those numbers for a moment.

In 2000 Blair's Health Secretary Alan Milburn signed a concordat with the private sector that brought private provision of medical services into the NHS for the first time, contracting out routine surgery and diagnostic tests to private treatment centres at greater cost than the same procedures on the NHS. After leaving government Milburn became a well paid adviser to Bridgepoint, a venture capital company closely involved with NHS privatisation. Another Labour Health Secretary, Patricia Hewitt, took a similar path. Blair's health adviser Simon

Stevens later became NHS chief executive under David Cameron, having spent the years in between as president of United Health Europe, a major American health insurance company.

Then came David Cameron's Health and Social Care Act of 2012, which went further than anything before it. It removed the Secretary of State for Health's legal duty to provide healthcare for all, handed responsibility to a series of new quangos, and opened all major NHS contracts to the private sector. The man who promised before the election that there would be no top down reorganisation of the NHS delivered the biggest restructure since its creation.

Think about what the NHS does for free and then think about what the same thing costs in America. Having a baby in the US with no insurance will cost you around $30,000 for a straightforward birth and up to $50,000 for a caesarean section. Even with insurance the average total bill is over $20,000 with nearly $3,000 of that coming out of your own pocket. A hip replacement costs $30,000 to $50,000. Chemotherapy runs anywhere from $1,000 to $12,000 a month just for the drugs, and if you need four sessions a year that's up to $48,000, which is roughly the average American annual wage, your entire year's income just to stay alive. A Bloomberg investigation in 2025 found that one generic chemo drug cost $134 at a clinic and $13,560 at a hospital down the same street, same drug, different prices. Cancer treatment in its first phase alone averages $28,000 for prostate cancer and over $68,000 for lung cancer. Medical debt is the leading cause of personal bankruptcy in the wealthiest country on earth. My mum's cancer treatment, the operations, the consultations, the chemotherapy, the follow up care, all of it would have run into tens of thousands of dollars in America. On the NHS it didn't cost our family a penny.

Now ask yourself where your tax money is actually going. In 1980 when the NHS was still fully public, virtually every penny of the budget was spent within the NHS itself. Staff, buildings, equipment, medicine, all publicly owned and publicly run. There was no private provision of clinical services, no internal market, no PFI. The money went in and it stayed in. By 2009 nearly 4% of the NHS budget was flowing out to private providers. By 2019 that had almost doubled to 7.3%, and the Centre for Health and the Public Interest says that figure is a significant underestimate, putting the real number at closer to 18% when you include all the spending that flows to private companies through local authorities and social care. On top of that you've got over £2 billion a year going out in PFI repayments, plus £1.9 billion in profits those PFI companies made from NHS contracts between 2004 and 2021, plus another £1.07 billion in dividends and nearly £47.6 million in directors' fees. So a system that was designed so every penny went towards making people better is now sending billions to people whose only interest is making money.

And now we arrive at Palantir.

Palantir is a tech company founded in 2003 by the Silicon Valley billionaire Peter Thiel with original funding from the CIA. Most of its business has come from providing surveillance software to the US military, intelligence agencies and police forces. Thiel co-founded PayPal, was the first outside investor in Facebook, donated thirty five million dollars to Republican candidates in the 2022 midterms, backed Donald Trump in 2016 and joined his transition team. He described the British public's relationship with the NHS as "Stockholm syndrome"

and has said the NHS "makes people sick" and that the country should "rip the whole thing from the ground and start over."

Despite all of that, in November 2023 the NHS awarded a Palantir-led consortium a contract worth up to three hundred and thirty million pounds to build a data platform linking up patient data across NHS England over seven years. The foot in the door came during Covid when Palantir's software was used in the vaccine rollout for a fee of just one pound. Internal emails later revealed that Palantir's UK chief had sent a message to colleagues titled "Buying our way in" suggesting that "hoovering up" existing NHS suppliers could "take a lot of ground and take down a lot of political resistance." The company poached at least three former NHS data experts including the head of artificial intelligence for the NHS who had helped launch the very Covid datastore that first brought Palantir into the health service.

Thirty five MPs signed an early day motion raising concerns about giving contracts to a company whose founder "has repeatedly been shown not to be in alignment" with British democratic values. And the software itself? By the end of 2024 fewer than a quarter of England's two hundred and fifteen hospital trusts were actually using it. Leeds Teaching Hospitals said adopting some of the tools would lead them to "lose functionality rather than gain it." The government then paid KPMG eight million pounds to go around hospitals promoting Palantir's software, which raises the obvious question, if it's so good why does it need an eight million pound sales campaign?

And even the numbers around the contract don't add up. NHS England publicly announced it as three hundred and thirty million over seven years but the official contract award notice listed a lower figure of a hundred and eighty two million ending in February 2027, and that discrepancy has never been explained publicly. So we don't even know the real cost of the thing.

Now as I'm writing this in early 2026 the situation is moving fast and it is not looking good for Palantir. The science minister Lord Vallance has told MPs that future tech contracts will prioritise British companies, which is a pretty clear signal of direction, and the contract itself includes break clauses that MPs are actively urging ministers to exercise. Every senior NHS tech leader who oversaw the Palantir deal has either left or is leaving, the CIO gone in March 2025, the chief data officer gone in April, the CTO gone this month. The people who brought Palantir in are all walking out the door.

The British Medical Association, the doctors' union, has passed a formal resolution calling for the contract to be cancelled outright, saying it "threatens to undermine public trust in NHS data systems" and pointing to the firm's track record of creating discriminatory policing software in the US and its close links to a US government which shows little regard for international law. They've told doctors to limit their engagement with the platform. The Green Party leader Zack Polanski personally delivered a termination notice to Palantir telling them to "pack your bags and get the hell out of the NHS," calling them a "Trump supporting military surveillance outfit" with no place in Britain's most important institution.

Greater Manchester, which manages health services for two point eight million people, has again refused to sign up and is the only integrated care board in England to hold out, saying NHS England hasn't addressed its concerns about the risks. There is something that should be highlighted, NHS England itself is being abolished, the government plans to fold it into the

Department of Health by April 2027, which is exactly when the Palantir contract has its break clause. So the organisation that signed the deal won't even exist by the time the contract comes up for review.

Privacy campaigners are warning that the platform could allow other government departments like the Home Office and police to access confidential patient data, and given what Palantir is doing elsewhere in the world right now those warnings feel very real. As I write this, reports have emerged that Palantir is working on a tool for US Immigration and Customs Enforcement that populates a map with potential deportation targets, brings up a dossier on each person and provides a confidence score on their current address. ICE has been acting like a personalised paramilitary police force under Trump, and Palantir is providing the targeting software. This is the same company with access to NHS patient data for sixty million people in England.

And it goes further than immigration. In Gaza the same corporate platforms that helped generate kill lists, optimise bombing campaigns and feed AI assisted targeting systems during the conflict are now being positioned for the reconstruction, woven into proposed civilian infrastructure for housing, welfare, policing and borders. The technology that was used to destroy is being repurposed to rebuild and control, and Palantir is right in the middle of it. As of early 2026 the company operates across five continents, holds contracts with more than thirty governments and its annual revenue has hit four and a half billion dollars. The NHS contract isn't the endgame, it's a foothold, and patient data for sixty million people is the product.

A healthcare system inspired by Welsh miners looking after each other, built by a miner's son who refused to back down, free at the point of use, paid for by the people for the people, the most civilised step any country had ever taken. Within fifty years the private sector was being invited in through deals that cost billions more than necessary. Within seventy five years the patient data of the entire nation was being handed to an American surveillance company whose founder thinks the NHS makes people sick, whose technology is being used to target immigrants and whose platforms helped generate kill lists in an active war zone.

Someone builds something with good intentions, an institution forms around it. Power finds a way in and the original purpose gets hollowed out. We've seen this before and we'll see it again.

Justice System

So I had my experience with the judicial system and I look back now and see it gave me a chance. Not sending me to prison was the right call, honestly that wouldn't have helped me, in fact it could have been so detrimental that it completely changed the trajectory of my life. I imagine I would have come out bitter, angry, surrounded by people who'd done far worse, learning things I didn't need to learn, and instead of straightening out I'd have gone further down a road I was already dangerously close to. But instead I used it as a chance to say right, that's that, that's a road I'm not going down. And I didn't.

But I was brought up in a good home. Two parents, a warm house, adventures, gifts and lots of laughs. My privilege is right there and not everyone has that. There will always be cries of well that's no excuse, people have it tough and they don't break the law, and I understand that argument but the fact is it is an excuse. Until you have lived someone's experiences it is impossible to judge them fairly. A kid who grows up with nothing, no stability, no safety, no one showing them what a good decision looks like, that kid is not starting from the same place as I was and pretending otherwise is dishonest. The system I went through gave me a chance because someone in that system saw something worth saving. Not everyone gets that.

So let's go as far back as we can to see where the idea of justice first appears in history, because if we're questioning everything else in this book we might as well question this too.

The oldest evidence of a written legal code was found at Ebla in modern Syria, dating back to around 2400 BCE, but only fragments survive. The oldest one we can actually read is the Code of Ur-Nammu from Sumer in modern Iraq, written around 2100 BCE, over four thousand years ago. It contained 57 laws and was carved onto clay tablets in cuneiform script. The king Ur-Nammu, or possibly his son Shulgi, presented the laws as coming from the gods, which is a trick we've seen before and will see again, and the prologue declared that the king had "banished malediction, violence and strife" and "established equity in the land."

Now here's the interesting thing. The Code of Ur-Nammu, the oldest surviving set of laws in human history, was actually more lenient than what came after it. Most punishments were monetary fines. You stole something, you paid compensation. You injured someone, you paid them. It was closer to what we'd now call restorative justice, the idea that you make things right rather than just punish. Capital punishment existed but only for the most serious offences like murder and robbery. The main issue with this though is the obvious, those who can afford it can pay and get off relatively lightly, those that can’t feel much harder.

Three hundred years later came the Code of Hammurabi, 282 laws carved into a seven foot pillar of black stone in Babylon around 1750 BCE. This is where "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" comes from. It was harsher, more rigid, and it introduced something that should trouble anyone who believes in equality before the law. It had three tiers of justice. If you were wealthy you got one punishment, if you were a free citizen you got another, and if you were a slave you got the worst of it. A doctor who killed a rich patient had his hands cut off. A doctor who killed a slave just had to pay a fine. Different rules for different people depending on where they sat in the hierarchy.

So the pattern is there from the very start. The first attempt at written law was fairer than the second. The system got harsher over time, not more just. And by the time Hammurabi carved his laws into stone the principle was already established that the rich and the poor would be treated differently. Four thousand years later you could argue not much has changed.

Both Ur-Nammu and Hammurabi claimed their laws were given to them by the gods. Moses did the same thing with the Ten Commandments centuries later.The message every time is the same, don't question the rules because God wrote them. It's the oldest trick in the book and it worked then the same way it works now, you wrap authority in something sacred and suddenly questioning it becomes not just illegal but immoral.

Now let's jump forward a few thousand years because for most of recorded history there was no such thing as a police force. Laws existed but enforcement was local, messy and inconsistent. In England up until the early 1800s, policing was done by unpaid parish constables, elected locals who had no training, no uniform and no real authority beyond what the community gave them. If things got seriously out of hand the army was sent in, which as you can imagine didn't tend to end well. In 1819 at St Peter's Field in Manchester, a crowd of 60,000 people gathered peacefully to call for the right to vote. The cavalry charged into them. At least eighteen people were killed and hundreds injured. They called it the Peterloo Massacre.

It was against that background, a country terrified of revolution, an industrial population growing faster than anyone could control, and a ruling class who needed order without the political cost of sending in the military, that Robert Peel created the Metropolitan Police in 1829. London at the time had a population of nearly one and a half million people and was policed by just 450 constables and 4,500 night watchmen spread across dozens of separate organisations. Crime was rising, or at least the reporting of it was, and the middle and upper classes wanted something done about it.

Peel's genius was making the police look civilian. He dressed them in blue rather than military red, gave them wooden truncheons instead of swords, put them in top hats to look like ordinary citizens, and insisted they patrol on foot. The message was clear, these are not soldiers, they are your neighbours in uniform. His most famous principle, whether he actually wrote it or not, was that "the police are the public and the public are the police." Their effectiveness was to be measured not by the number of arrests but by the absence of crime. The first constables were paid a guinea a week, more than a labourer but less than a skilled worker, and they worked twelve hour shifts six days a week walking up to ten miles a day.

They were not popular. Handbills called them "Raw Lobsters" and "Blue Devils" and "Peel's Bloody Gang." Officers were physically attacked in the streets, some were impaled, some blinded, and on one occasion a constable was held down while a vehicle was driven over him. Within a year the first officer was killed on duty. But crime fell, and within thirty years every city in Britain was required to have its own police force modelled on Peel's design. The idea crossed the Atlantic and shaped police forces across America from the 1840s onwards.

So the first modern police force was created not because the public demanded protection but because the ruling class needed a way to maintain order without using the military. It was born out of fear of revolution, not a desire for justice. That doesn't mean it was a bad idea,

Peel's principles were genuinely progressive and the concept of policing by consent is one of the better ideas anyone has had about how power should work. But the origin matters because it tells you who the system was designed to serve first, and the answer isn't ordinary people.

Peel's idea worked though, at least on paper. Crime fell, the public eventually came round, and within thirty years every city in Britain had a police force modelled on his design. The concept crossed the Atlantic and shaped American policing from the 1840s onwards. For a while it was genuinely one of the better things a government had ever done, civilians keeping order by consent, no weapons beyond a wooden truncheon, measured not by arrests but by the absence of crime. If it had stayed that way this would be a very short chapter. But it didn't stay that way, it never does.

By the mid twentieth century policing in both Britain and America had become something Robert Peel would not have recognised. The science had improved enormously, fingerprinting, forensic evidence, criminal databases, radio communication, specialist detective units, all of it meant that police were genuinely better at solving crime than they had ever been. Thousands of dedicated officers spent their careers doing extraordinary work, pulling people from burning buildings, talking armed suspects down, spending years on cases that brought killers to justice, working nights and weekends in communities that needed them. There are officers who have saved lives and changed lives and never once made the news for it and that deserves to be said clearly. The vast majority of people who join the police do it because they want to help, and plenty of them do exactly that for their entire careers.

But the institution itself developed a sickness, and the sickness had a name. It was institutional racism, institutional corruption, and institutional arrogance, and in some cases all three at the same time.

In 1970 a group of black activists in London known as the Mangrove Nine were put on trial after protesting against the Metropolitan Police's repeated targeting of a Caribbean restaurant in Notting Hill called The Mangrove. The police had raided the place twelve times without finding anything illegal. The nine defendants were acquitted of the most serious charges and the trial became the first judicial acknowledgement that racial hatred existed within the Met, that was over fifty years ago.

Everyone in the UK should know the story of Stephen Lawrence, he was murdered in an unprovoked racist knife attack in Eltham, South London. Five white suspects were identified almost immediately. The police investigation was so incompetent, so riddled with failures, so lacking in basic professionalism that Stephen's family were forced to campaign for years just to get anyone to take the case seriously. His mother Doreen Lawrence, who would later become a Baroness, said publicly that the investigation failed because her son was black.

In 1999 the Macpherson Report was published following an inquiry into the handling of the murder. It found that the investigation had been "marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership by senior officers." It concluded that the Metropolitan Police was institutionally racist and made 70 recommendations for reform. It took until 2012, nearly twenty years after the murder, for two of the suspects to finally be convicted.

Twenty two years after the Macpherson Report a parliamentary committee investigated what had changed. Baroness Lawrence told them "things have become really stagnant and nothing seems to have moved." At current rates of progress the committee found that police forces won't be representative of the communities they serve for another twenty years, which would be nearly half a century after Macpherson raised the issue and over fifty years after Stephen Lawrence was stabbed to death on a pavement in South East London.

Then in 2021 a serving Metropolitan Police firearms officer called Wayne Couzens kidnapped, raped and murdered a woman called Sarah Everard as she walked home in South London. He used his warrant card and handcuffs to stage a fake arrest. The Baroness Casey review that followed found the Met was still riddled with misogyny, racism and homophobia. Senior officers had previously dismissed the problems as "a few bad apples" but the review made clear it was the barrel that was rotten, and had been for decades.

Around the same time it emerged that between 2014 and 2015 a serial killer called Stephen Port had murdered four young men he met on Grindr, dumping their bodies near his flat in East London. The Metropolitan Police investigation was so poor, so lacking in what reviewers called "professional curiosity," that a coroner's inquest accused the force of institutional homophobia. Four young men were dead and the police had barely looked into it.

Now America has its own version of this story and it's worse.

The history of American policing cannot be separated from the history of American racism because in large parts of the country the two were the same thing. In the southern states before the Civil War, the earliest forms of organised policing were slave patrols, groups of armed white men whose job was to capture runaway slaves and suppress any attempts at resistance. After abolition those same structures didn't disappear, they evolved into the police forces and sheriff's departments that enforced Jim Crow segregation for the next hundred years. The Ku Klux Klan had members serving as police officers, sheriffs and judges throughout the South well into the twentieth century and in some cases beyond it.

The civil rights era of the 1950s and 1960s saw American police turn fire hoses on children, set dogs on peaceful marchers, beat protesters unconscious on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, and stand by while black churches were bombed. The FBI under J Edgar Hoover ran a programme called COINTELPRO that infiltrated civil rights organisations, surveilled Martin Luther King, sent him a letter encouraging him to kill himself, and worked actively to destroy the movement from within. This wasn't rogue officers, this was institutional policy.

In 1991 a bystander filmed four Los Angeles police officers beating a black motorist called Rodney King with batons over fifty times while he lay on the ground. All four officers were later acquitted, the city then erupted and sixty three people died in the riots that followed.

In 2020 a Minneapolis police officer called Derek Chauvin knelt on the neck of a black man called George Floyd for over nine minutes while Floyd said "I can't breathe" and bystanders begged the officer to stop, Floyd died. The footage was seen around the world and sparked

protests in every US state and in countries across Europe, Asia and South America. It wasn't a new problem, it was one that was now being actively filmed by the general public.

Between these two events, an uncountable number of black Americans were shot, choked, beaten and killed by police officers across the country. Some names became known, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, a twelve year old boy shot dead within two seconds of police arriving, Breonna Taylor, shot in her own bed during a botched raid that entered the wrong house, Philando Castile, shot during a routine traffic stop with his girlfriend and her four year old daughter in the car. For every name that made the news there were hundreds that didn't.

And yet alongside all of that there were officers who gave everything to protect their communities, who ran into danger while everyone else ran out, who spent decades building trust in neighbourhoods that had every reason not to trust them, who solved cases that nobody else could, who treated every person they met with dignity regardless of the colour of their skin. The tragedy of institutional corruption is that it poisons the reputation of everyone in uniform, the good and the bad alike, and the people who suffer within the force are the ones who joined for the right reasons and now have to carry the weight of everything their institution has done wrong.

Now let's talk about courts, because if policing is where the justice system meets the street then the courts are where it decides who pays and how much.

There is a phrase you hear a lot in legal circles, "justice is blind." The idea being that the law treats everyone equally regardless of wealth, status or background. It's a nice thought and in some courtrooms with some judges it might even be true. But the data tells a different story.

If you steal £100 from a shop you will almost certainly be arrested, charged, taken to court, given a criminal record and in some cases sent to prison. If you steal £100 million through financial fraud, market manipulation or tax evasion you will almost certainly be investigated by a regulatory body, offered the chance to settle with a fine, and walk away without a criminal conviction. The crime is the same, taking something that doesn't belong to you, but the system treats them as entirely different things depending on who is doing the taking.

After the 2008 financial crisis, the number of senior banking executives in the United States who went to prison was one. One person. Kareem Serageldin, a mid-level Credit Suisse trader, got thirty months. Nobody from Goldman Sachs, nobody from JP Morgan, nobody from Lehman Brothers, nobody from any of the institutions that caused the worst financial disaster in eighty years saw the inside of a cell. The banks paid fines, billions in fines, but fines paid by a corporation are just a cost of doing business. Nobody is personally punished, the money comes from shareholders and customers, not from the people who made the decisions.

Meanwhile in Britain, benefit fraud costs the government an estimated £6.3 billion a year. Tax evasion and avoidance by corporations and wealthy individuals costs the government an estimated £36 billion a year. One of these gets front page headlines, political campaigns, dedicated investigation units and prison sentences. The other gets a polite letter from HMRC

and sometimes a fine. I'll let you guess which is which.And then there are the cases that make you question whether the word justice should be used at all.

In Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, between 2003 and 2008 two judges called Mark Ciavarella and Michael Conahan ran what became known as the "kids for cash" scandal. What they did is almost too grotesque to believe but every word of it is documented and proven in court.

Conahan, who was the senior judge, shut down the county-run juvenile detention centre. Then both judges accepted $2.8 million in kickbacks from the builder and co-owner of two private, for-profit juvenile prisons. In return, Ciavarella, who presided over the juvenile court, imposed a zero tolerance policy that guaranteed a steady flow of children into those private facilities. Over five years roughly 2,500 children appeared before Ciavarella. Over half of them had no legal representation. Children as young as twelve were sent away in handcuffs for offences that should never have resulted in detention. A fourteen year old girl was sentenced for creating a fake MySpace page mocking her assistant principal. A fourteen year old boy was locked up after his parents unknowingly bought him a stolen scooter from a family member, he ended up in and out of the system for five years. A thirteen year old girl was detained for throwing a volleyball at another student. Children were sent to prison for trespassing in a vacant building, for stealing a CD from Walmart, for being in the wrong place at the wrong time with no one to speak for them.

One sixteen year old girl who appeared before Ciavarella for driving the wrong way down a one way street was sentenced to eleven months. The judge counted the buttons on her shirt and used that number as the sentence. Another juvenile went in for a release hearing and was sentenced to an additional eight months because they picked the wrong sports team. These are not exaggerations, these are findings of fact from a federal court.

Several of the children who passed through Ciavarella's courtroom later died. Some from drug overdoses, some by suicide. One mother called Sandy Fonzo, whose son Ed was imprisoned by Ciavarella at seventeen and never recovered, confronted the judge outside the courthouse after the scandal broke. Her son had killed himself. She screamed at him that he had ruined her son's life, he walked past her without a word.

In 2011 Ciavarella was found guilty of twelve federal charges including racketeering, fraud and money laundering. He was sentenced to 28 years in prison. He still insists he did nothing wrong. Conahan pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 17 and a half years, but was released to home confinement during Covid with six years still to serve, and then had his sentence commuted entirely by President Biden in his final round of clemency. The builder who constructed the private prisons got one year. The co-owner who paid the kickbacks got eighteen months at a low security facility in Florida. A federal judge ordered Ciavarella and Conahan to pay $206 million in damages to the victims, $106 million compensatory and $100 million punitive. They will almost certainly never pay a penny of it.

The Pennsylvania Supreme Court threw out 4,000 juvenile convictions. Four thousand children who had been found guilty by a judge who was being paid to find them guilty. Four thousand families who were told the system had weighed the evidence and made a fair decision when the reality was that the decision had been bought and paid for before the child even walked through the door.

This is not a story about two bad judges. This is a story about a system that allowed it to happen for five years. A system where children appeared in court without lawyers and nobody questioned it. A system where a judge could send a twelve year old to a private prison for a minor offence and nobody stepped in. A system where the people making the rules were the same people profiting from the punishment. And when it was finally exposed, the people at the bottom, the children, got the worst of it and the people at the top, the builders and the investors, got a slap on the wrist and a comfortable cell.

Four thousand years ago the Code of Ur-Nammu attempted to establish fairness. It used fines instead of mutilation, compensation instead of cruelty. Three hundred years later Hammurabi introduced three tiers of justice based on class, one law for the rich and another for the poor. Four thousand years after that we're still running the same system, the details have changed but the structure hasn't.

Energy, Agriculture & Global Warming

This chapter on its own could go on for a vast series of books. The amount of material, the number of cases, the scale of what's been done to this planet and the people living on it in the name of profit is so overwhelming that trying to squeeze it into a single chapter feels almost disrespectful to the subject. But we have to start somewhere and we have to keep moving, so I'll do my best to cover the ground that matters most and trust that if any of it makes you angry enough you'll go and look further into it yourself.

Over the years I've tried to do my bit. I stopped eating beef for a while, tried full veganism, I reuse and recycle as much as I can, and I genuinely care about where this is all heading. But ultimately I want holidays, I enjoy a variety of food, I like the comfort of a warm house and a car that works, and at some point you begin to realise how little individual choices actually make when the institutions responsible for the vast majority of the damage carry on regardless. Unless the corporations change, unless the governments force them to change, unless the systems that prioritise profit over everything else are fundamentally restructured, individual action is just pissing into the wind. That's not a reason to stop trying but it is a reason to start asking who's really responsible and why they've been allowed to get away with it for so long.

Let's start with a story about electricity, because it sets the tone for everything that follows and it involves a recurring theme you'll recognise by now. One man wanted to give something to the world for free. Another wanted to sell it. I bet you can already guess the outcome.

In 1884 a young Serbian immigrant called Nikola Tesla arrived in the United States with almost nothing to his name. He went to work for Thomas Edison, the most famous inventor in America, but left after just six months. The two men had fundamentally different visions for how electricity should work. Edison had built his empire on direct current, DC, which was inefficient and couldn't travel long distances without losing power. Tesla had developed alternating current, AC, which could be transmitted over vast distances cheaply and efficiently. Edison knew that if AC won, his entire business model was finished, so he launched what became known as the "War of Currents," a public campaign to discredit Tesla's system by electrocuting animals in public demonstrations to show how "dangerous" alternating current was. He even helped develop the electric chair specifically to associate AC with death.

Tesla won the war. His AC system was adopted as the standard and it remains the foundation of virtually every power grid in the world today. When you switch on a light, charge your phone, or turn on the heating, you're using Nikola Tesla's invention. But Tesla wasn't interested in just improving how electricity was delivered. He wanted to change the entire relationship between energy and humanity.

In 1901 Tesla persuaded the financier JP Morgan, the same JP Morgan we met in the finance chapter, to invest $150,000 in a project called Wardenclyffe Tower on Long Island, New York. Tesla pitched it as a wireless communications system that could send messages

across the Atlantic, but his real ambition was far bigger than that. He wanted to transmit free electrical energy wirelessly to anywhere on the planet. No wires, no meters, no bills. A 187 foot tower with a huge copper dome on top and iron roots driven 120 feet into the earth, designed to use the planet itself as a conductor and send energy through the ground and the atmosphere to receivers anywhere in the world. Free electricity for everyone.

Morgan's money was supposed to fund a radio competitor to Marconi. When he realised Tesla's actual goal was to give energy away for free he refused to put in another penny. And why would he? Morgan had major investments in General Electric and in the entire copper wire infrastructure that delivered electricity to homes and businesses across America. Every mile of copper wire, every meter, every bill, every power station, all of it depended on electricity being something you paid for. Free wireless energy would have destroyed the whole model overnight. When Tesla wrote to Morgan begging for more funds, asking him "will you help me or let my great work, almost complete, go to pots?" Morgan's reply was blunt. "I should not feel disposed at present to make any further advances."

A few nights after that letter the tower came alive one last time. Residents for a hundred miles around reported bright crackling flashes of blue light shooting into the sky, visible as far away as Connecticut. No explanation was given. The tower never operated again. Tesla couldn't find another investor because he'd already burned his bridges with Morgan and John Jacob Astor, another wealthy backer he'd misled about his true intentions. The project was abandoned in 1906, the tower was demolished for scrap in 1917, and Tesla spent the rest of his life in increasing poverty, living in hotel rooms, feeding pigeons in the park, his mind still racing with ideas that nobody would fund.He died alone in room 3327 of the New Yorker Hotel in January 1943 at the age of 86.

Within two days the FBI swooped in. Not two weeks, not two months, two days. The Office of Alien Property Custodian seized his papers, his notes, everything in the room, and called in Dr John G Trump, a professor of electrical engineering at MIT, to examine them. John G Trump was the uncle of Donald Trump. After a three day examination Trump declared the papers to be "primarily of a speculative, philosophical and promotional character" and of no significant value. The government recorded 80 trunks of Tesla's belongings. When they were finally shipped to his nephew in Belgrade, only 60 arrived. Nobody has ever explained what happened to the other 20. The FBI didn't fully declassify its Tesla files until 2016 and even then questions remain about what's missing. Donald Trump has referenced his uncle many times over the years, once saying "my uncle used to tell me about nuclear before nuclear was nuclear."

Edison died rich, celebrated, with streets and schools and companies named after him. Tesla died poor, forgotten, in a room he couldn't afford, his life's work seized by the government before his body was cold. The man who wanted to sell electricity to the world became a hero. The man who wanted to give it away became a footnote. And JP Morgan, the man who pulled the funding because free energy couldn't be monetised, went on to help create the financial system we're still living under today.

Whether Tesla's wireless energy would have actually worked at global scale is genuinely debated by physicists, and I want to be honest about that. The science of transmitting meaningful amounts of power through the earth and atmosphere over thousands of miles

was unproven then and remains unproven now. But what isn't debated is the reason the project was killed. It wasn't killed because it couldn't work, it was killed because if it did work, the most powerful men in America wouldn't have been able to charge for it. And that tells you everything you need to know about how energy has been managed ever since.

Now let's talk about oil, because the story of energy in the twentieth century is really the story of who controls it and what they're willing to do to keep that control. And to understand the oil crisis you need to understand what came before it, because there's a backstory that most people in Britain and America were never taught, and without it the rest of this chapter doesn't make sense.

After the First World War the Ottoman Empire collapsed and Britain and France carved up the Middle East between them. Nobody asked the people living there. Britain took Palestine, Iraq and Transjordan. France took Syria and Lebanon. For the next 30 years, from 1918 to 1948, there were no major wars between the nations of the Middle East. The conflicts that did happen were almost entirely colonial, local populations resisting European powers who had drawn lines on a map and decided who owned what. The 1936 to 1939 Arab revolt in Palestine against British rule killed over 5,000 Arabs, 400 Jews and 200 British, and the British crushed it so thoroughly that 10 percent of the adult Arab male population was killed, wounded, imprisoned or exiled. That devastation of Palestinian society directly shaped what happened when the British finally left in 1948. But the point is this, for 30 years the region's violence was not nations attacking nations, it was empires controlling people and people fighting back against empires. That's the pattern again.

In 1948 Israel declared independence. Five Arab nations invaded: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Iran was not one of them. Iran had its own issues to deal with, Soviet pressure in the north, internal tensions between the Shah and parliament, and a growing dispute with Britain over who owned Iran's oil. Iran had actually recognised Israel in 1950, becoming the second Muslim-majority country to do so after Turkey. It was not an enemy of Israel. It was barely involved in the wider Arab-Israeli conflict at all.

In the early 1950s Iran was one of the most progressive countries in the Middle East. It had a parliament, a free press, an educated middle class, women in universities, a functioning democracy. In April 1951 the Iranian parliament democratically elected a man called Mohammad Mosaddegh as prime minister. He was fiercely nationalist, hugely popular, Time magazine's Man of the Year, and he had one big idea that put him on a collision course with the most powerful countries on earth. He wanted to nationalise Iran's oil.

At the time Iran's oil was controlled by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, a British firm that would later become BP. The profits were flowing out of Iran and into British pockets, and Mosaddegh said enough. The Iranian parliament voted to take back control of their own natural resources. Britain was furious.

Rather than negotiate, Britain set about destroying Iran's economy. The moment nationalisation was passed, Britain imposed a worldwide boycott on Iranian oil, pressuring

every major oil company and every buyer on the planet not to touch it. The Royal Navy sent warships to the Persian Gulf and threatened to board any tanker carrying Iranian crude. British technicians were pulled out of the Abadan refinery, the largest oil refinery in the world at the time, so that Iran couldn't run it properly. Britain froze Iranian assets held in British banks. They initially considered a full military invasion to seize Abadan by force but were talked out of it. By September 1951, just months after nationalisation, Iran's oil exports had been reduced to zero. Not reduced, not slowed down, zero. The plan was simple, strangle the Iranian economy so completely that the people would turn on Mosaddegh and he'd fall without Britain having to lift a finger.

But Mosaddegh didn't fall. Britain took the case to the International Court of Justice at The Hague and Mosaddegh flew to New York personally to argue Iran's side. He was so persuasive that the court ruled it had no jurisdiction, handing Britain its first ever defeat at a UN security council resolution. He couldn't be beaten diplomatically, he couldn't be beaten legally, and even with his country's entire oil income reduced to nothing he was still standing. So Britain decided to overthrow him instead. MI6 drew up a plan called Operation Boot. But Mosaddegh found out about it, closed the British embassy in October 1952 and expelled every British diplomat in the country, flushing out the spies along with them.

With no agents left in Iran and no leverage left to pull, Britain went to the Americans. Declassified State Department documents released in 2017 confirm that the British Foreign Office approached the Truman administration on more than one occasion in late 1952, beginning in October, through a sustained campaign of communications and meetings trying to win approval for Mosaddegh's overthrow. MI6 agents met their CIA counterparts separately in November 1952. Every time, Truman said no. He believed the West's best hope was to work with Mosaddegh, not against him. To the end of his presidency in January 1953 he refused to support a coup.

But the British were so desperate they couldn't even wait for the next president to be inaugurated. Before Eisenhower had even taken office they sent agents to approach him, going behind Truman's back, and crucially they changed the story. With Truman they'd pitched it as a dispute over oil. With Eisenhower they reframed it as a fight against communism, claiming Mosaddegh was opening the door to Soviet influence. It was nonsense, Mosaddegh had actually excluded communists from his government, and his own Secretary of State Dean Acheson later admitted the communist threat was a smokescreen, but in the paranoid atmosphere of the early Cold War it was enough. Eisenhower authorised the coup in April 1953. The CIA launched Operation Ajax.

They bribed journalists to print lies about Mosaddegh. They paid politicians and mullahs to denounce him. They hired mobs to create chaos in the streets of Tehran. CIA agent Kermit Roosevelt, the grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt, ran the operation on the ground with suitcases full of cash. The first attempt failed and the Shah fled to Rome in panic, but Roosevelt regrouped, mobilised the military, and on the 19th of August 1953 Mosaddegh's government was overthrown. Around 300 people died in the fighting. Mosaddegh was arrested, tried, and spent the rest of his life under house arrest until his death in 1967. The CIA didn't formally admit its role until 2013, 60 years later.

When Eisenhower left office in January 1961 he gave a farewell address that has haunted American politics ever since. A 4 star general who had commanded the Allied forces in the Second World War used his final speech to warn the American people about a force he believed was more dangerous than any foreign enemy, what he called the military-industrial complex, a permanent alliance between the military establishment and the arms industry that he said threatened democracy itself. "We must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence," he said. "The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist." The irony is hard to miss. Under his own presidency the CIA had run 170 covert operations, overthrown democratic governments in Iran and Guatemala, and the American nuclear stockpile had grown from roughly 1,000 warheads to over 24,000. He built the machine and then warned everyone about it on his way out the door.

The Shah was reinstated as a Western-backed dictator. His secret police, SAVAK, trained by the CIA, became one of the most feared organisations in the Middle East. For 26 years Iran was run as an authoritarian state friendly to Western oil interests. Then in 1979 the Iranian people revolted, 9 million of them in the streets, and the Shah was overthrown. But what replaced him was not the democracy that Mosaddegh had tried to build. It was the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini, a theocracy that has controlled Iran ever since. The country went from a progressive democracy to a Western-backed dictatorship to a religious autocracy in less than 30 years, and none of it had to happen.

Now the conventional explanation for the coup is straightforward and it's largely true. Britain wanted to protect its oil profits and the US was paranoid about Soviet expansion. Control of Middle Eastern oil was the strategic prize and Mosaddegh threatened it by insisting that Iran's resources should belong to Iran. After the coup, 5 American oil companies were given a share of Iranian oil that they'd never had before, so while Britain instigated the whole thing it was America that ended up benefiting most.

But there's another angle worth considering and I want to be upfront that this is my own reading of the situation, not established fact, but it's the kind of question this book exists to ask.

Israel was founded in 1948, 5 years before the coup. From the beginning, the United States positioned Israel as its key ally in the Middle East, and one of the central justifications for that relationship, repeated by every American president since, is that Israel is "the only democracy in the Middle East." Joe Biden once said "were there not an Israel, the United States of America would have to invent an Israel to protect her interests in the region." Israel has received over $300 billion in total US aid since its founding, more than any other country on earth, and the current agreement commits nearly $4 billion a year in military assistance alone. The phrase "the only democracy in the Middle East" isn't just a description, it's a strategic argument for why that money keeps flowing.

Mosaddegh's Iran was not at war with Israel. Iran didn't participate in the 1948 invasion and had recognised Israel's existence. Mosaddegh viewed Israel as a form of Western colonialism and he cooled diplomatic relations, closing Iran's consulate in Jerusalem in 1951, but he never revoked Iran's recognition, trade between the two countries continued, and he personally had good relations with Iran's Jewish community, even taking a Jewish journalist as an advisor on his trip to America. His issue with Israel was strategic, he needed Arab

support against Britain over oil, and Israel was collateral damage in that fight rather than the target. He wasn't an enemy of Israel. He was a nationalist focused on Iranian sovereignty.

So here's the question. What happens to the "only democracy in the Middle East" argument if Iran is also a democracy? A progressive, westernised, democratic Iran with its own parliament, its own free press, its own educated population making its own decisions about its own resources, and one that isn't even hostile to Israel. If Mosaddegh had been left alone to govern, if the country had continued on its democratic path, then the claim that Israel is the only democracy in the region doesn't hold up any more. And if that claim doesn't hold up, the justification for sending hundreds of billions of dollars becomes a much harder argument to make.

I'm not saying that's why the coup happened. The oil explanation is well documented and probably sufficient on its own. But I am saying that the outcome was remarkably convenient for a particular set of interests, and in a book about questioning everything it would be dishonest not to point that out. A democratic Iran was replaced with a dictator. That dictator was eventually replaced with a theocracy. And Israel remained, as intended, the only democracy in the region, with American money pouring in to keep it that way. After the coup, Iran-Israel relations improved dramatically under the Shah, Israel got a de facto embassy in Tehran, Iran became a major oil supplier to Israel, they even built a joint pipeline, and the two countries developed extensive secret military cooperation. Whether all of that was the plan or just a very fortunate coincidence is something I'll leave you to sit with.

What isn't speculation is what happened next. The Shah's fall in 1979 triggered the second oil crisis, Iranian oil exports collapsed, and prices doubled to $39 a barrel. But that crisis had been building since 1973, when the real shock hit.

On the 6th of October 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a coordinated attack on Israel on Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish calendar. The war lasted less than 3 weeks but its consequences reshaped the global economy for a generation. On the 19th of October, President Nixon asked Congress for $2.2 billion in emergency military aid to Israel. The Arab oil-producing nations responded the next day. Libya imposed an immediate embargo on oil exports to the United States. Saudi Arabia and the other Arab members of OPEC followed within 24 hours.

The weapon wasn't military. It was oil. And it worked.

Within months the price of a barrel of oil quadrupled from around $3 to nearly $12. Petrol stations across the United States ran dry. Signs reading "Sorry, No Gas Today" became a common sight. Queues stretched for miles, with drivers waiting hours just to fill up, and in some states fuel was rationed by licence plate number, odd numbers could buy on odd days, even numbers on even days. People were fighting at the pumps. The world's most powerful country was brought to its knees not by an invading army but by a tap being turned off.

In Britain the effects were just as severe. GDP fell by 3.9 percent and the recession lasted from 1973 to 1975. The government declared a state of emergency. A 3 day working week was introduced to conserve electricity. Speed limits were reduced. Television stations were ordered to stop broadcasting at half past ten at night to save power. The country that had

spent decades extracting oil from the Middle East and overthrowing governments to protect its access to it suddenly discovered what it felt like when someone else held the lever.

The embargo was lifted in March 1974 after Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy between the warring parties, but the price of oil stayed high. The world had changed. OPEC had demonstrated that oil could be used as a political weapon and that the industrialised nations were hopelessly dependent on a resource controlled by countries they had spent the previous century colonising and exploiting. The sensible response would have been to invest massively in alternative energy sources and begin the long process of reducing that dependency. That is not what happened.

Instead the West went back to business as usual. America's love affair with big cars and cheap petrol resumed almost immediately. Britain discovered North Sea oil in the mid 1970s and rather than using the revenue to build a sovereign wealth fund like Norway did with its own North Sea oil, Thatcher's government used the proceeds to fund tax cuts and offset the costs of deindustrialisation. The money came and the money went and when it was gone there was nothing to show for it.

Then in 1979 it happened again. The Iranian Revolution toppled the Shah, the very dictator the West had installed 26 years earlier to protect its oil interests, and Iranian oil exports collapsed. The price of crude more than doubled from $15 to $39 a barrel, its highest level in history at that point. A second wave of fuel shortages hit the United States. Long queues returned. Panic buying returned. President Carter went on television and called the crisis "the moral equivalent of war." He installed solar panels on the roof of the White House and urged Americans to reduce their energy consumption. Ronald Reagan, who replaced him, had the solar panels removed.

That detail tells you everything. One president saw a warning and tried to change direction. The next one ripped the warning down and carried on as if nothing had happened. The oil industry, the car industry, the defence industry, all of them needed the world to keep burning fossil fuels, and any president who suggested otherwise was replaced with one who wouldn't. Carter lost his re-election bid. Reagan won in a landslide. The solar panels came off the roof. And 4 decades later we're having the same conversation about the same dependency on the same resource controlled by the same interests, only now the planet is on fire as well.

Two oil crises in 6 years. Two unmistakable warnings that the entire Western economic model was built on a resource that could be switched off at any moment by people who had every reason to resent how they'd been treated. And the response both times was to double down, protect the oil companies, protect the car manufacturers, protect the status quo, and hope it would all work out. It didn't work out. It was never going to work out. And the people who made those decisions knew that at the time, they just didn't care because the profits were too good and the alternatives would have meant changing a system that was making them very rich.

Growing up in Wales it wasn't unusual to know a farmer or two, they were always busy, always on the go, you would maybe think they maybe would be shielded from international affairs but unfortunately not, so lets take a quick dive. In 1935 the United States had 6.8 million farms. Most of them were family operations, small to medium in size, diversified, rooted in their communities and passed down through generations. The farmer owned the land, grew the food, sold it locally or to regional buyers, and kept enough of the proceeds to live a decent life. It wasn't glamorous but it worked, and for the best part of two centuries the family farm was the backbone of rural America.

Then in the early 1970s Richard Nixon's Agriculture Secretary, a man called Earl Butz, looked at that system and decided it wasn't efficient enough. His advice to American farmers became a slogan that shaped the next half century of food production: "get big or get out." The government rolled back the price floors that had guaranteed farmers a minimum return on their crops since the New Deal. From that point on the global market determined what a farmer got paid, and if the price dropped below what it cost to produce, that was the farmer's problem. Big farms could survive low prices by scaling up, a few cents per gallon of milk adds up when you have thousands of cows, but small farms couldn't compete and they started going under by the tens of thousands.

By 2024 the number of farms in the United States had fallen below 2 million for the first time in recorded history. Total farmland had dropped to 876 million acres, the lowest since 1850. Between 2017 and 2024 alone, 160,000 farms disappeared, and 153,000 of those were the smallest. In the same period the number of large farms increased by 36 percent. Small farms accounted for nearly half of all US food production in 1991. By 2017 that had fallen to a quarter. In the dairy industry small farms now produce just 10 percent of the country's milk. The direction is clear and it has been for decades, fewer farms, bigger operations, more consolidation, less independence.

In Britain the picture is just as bleak. The number of English farms fell by nearly half between 2005 and 2013. There were over 125,000 farms with egg-laying hens in 1971, by 1999 there were 26,500. The number of UK dairy producers has fallen by 20 percent since 2019 alone, to about 7,000. Britain now produces only around 60 percent of its own food and imports the rest, which means the country that once fed itself is now dependent on supply chains it doesn't control, priced by markets it can't influence, and vulnerable to exactly the kind of disruption that a pandemic or a war can cause overnight.

And if you're wondering what killed the small farm, follow the money to the supermarket.

In the UK 6 supermarket chains control roughly 80 percent of the grocery market. That concentration of buying power gives them enormous leverage over the people who actually produce the food, and they use it ruthlessly. A dairy farmer in Britain is currently paid around 38 to 46 pence per litre of milk. It costs them between 40 and 50 pence per litre to produce it. In some cases farmers are being paid as low as 30 pence, well below what it costs them to keep the lights on and the cows fed. That same litre of milk sells on the supermarket shelf for 107 pence. That's a 133 percent markup while the person who produced it is making a loss. Some dairy farms in Britain are currently losing over a thousand pounds a day.

It's not just milk. A kilogram of carrots earns the farmer 14 pence. The supermarket sells it for 65 pence, a 364 percent markup. Beef goes from £4.80 a kilo at the farm gate to £10 on

the shelf. Lamb from £4.13 to £12. The farmer does the work, takes the risk, pays the feed bills and the vet bills and the fuel bills, and the supermarket takes the margin. One dairy farmer put it about as clearly as anyone could when he said "someone in the supply chain is filling their pockets, and it's not the farmers and it's not the processors, the only people filling their pockets are the retailers."

In 2015 supermarkets in Britain were selling milk cheaper than bottled water. Let that settle for a moment. A product that requires land, cattle, feed, labour, veterinary care, milking equipment, refrigeration, daily collection and transport was being sold for less than water in a plastic bottle and while the small farmer is being squeezed out of existence, someone is buying up the land they leave behind.

Bill Gates is the largest private farmland owner in the United States, holding over 250,000 acres across 19 states, bought quietly through shell companies and an investment firm called Cascade. He's not the biggest landowner overall, that's Stan Kroenke, the man who owns Arsenal football club among other things, and John Malone who has 2.2 million acres, and Jeff Bezos with 420,000. But Gates is the biggest when it comes specifically to productive farmland, the land that grows the food, and the secrecy around how he acquired it raised alarm bells across the agricultural world.

The United States is losing 2,000 acres of farmland every single day. Half of all remaining farmland is expected to change ownership in the next 25 years as the current generation of farmers retires, and when they do it won't be their children buying it because their children can't afford it. Land prices have been driven up by exactly the kind of institutional and billionaire investment that Gates represents, making it impossible for new or young farmers to get a foothold. The farm subsidies that were supposed to support the people working the land increasingly flow to the person who owns it, who might be a billionaire in Seattle or a pension fund in Canada or a church in Utah, while the actual farmer rents the ground they walk on and builds no equity of their own.

Forty percent of all US farmland is now rented to tenant farmers. They work the land, take the risk, and at the end of it they own nothing. The landowner collects the rent, collects the subsidies, watches the land value rise, and never gets their boots dirty. It's feudalism with a spreadsheet.

And the environmental cost of what we're producing on that land is staggering.

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, livestock production is responsible for 14.5 percent of all global greenhouse gas emissions. To put that in perspective, that's roughly the same as every car, lorry, ship, train and aeroplane on the planet combined. Livestock uses 77 percent of all agricultural land on earth but produces just 18 percent of the world's calories. Thirty percent of the entire land surface of the planet is used for livestock, either for grazing or for growing the crops that feed them. In the Amazon, 70 percent of previously forested land is now cattle pasture, with another 10 percent cleared to grow their feed. The meat industry is the single greatest driver of deforestation on earth.

Producing one pound of beef requires roughly 1,800 gallons of water. Agriculture as a whole now uses 70 percent of all available freshwater, 3 times what it used 50 years ago. Livestock is responsible for 37 percent of all methane emissions and 65 percent of all nitrous oxide

emissions, both of which trap heat in the atmosphere far more effectively than carbon dioxide. Nitrous oxide has 296 times the warming potential of CO2 and stays in the atmosphere for 150 years.

And while all of this is happening, while the forests are being cleared and the water is being drained and the atmosphere is being loaded with methane and nitrous oxide, the global demand for meat is projected by the FAO to increase by 70 percent by 2050. Not decrease. Increase. We already know what it's doing to the planet and the plan is to do more of it.

Seventy five percent of all crop genetic diversity has been lost in the last century. That means the global food system is becoming less resilient at the exact moment it needs to be more resilient. Fewer varieties of crops, more dependence on a handful of strains, more vulnerability to disease, drought and climate disruption. The industrialisation of farming hasn't just squeezed out the small farmer, it's narrowed the genetic base of the food supply itself, and when something goes wrong with a monoculture it doesn't go a bit wrong, it goes catastrophically wrong.

None of this is hidden. The data comes from the United Nations, from government agencies, from peer-reviewed research. It's not speculation, it's not theory and yet the institutions responsible for it, the corporations that profit from it, the governments that subsidise it, carry on as though the numbers don't exist. Because changing course would mean confronting the people who write the cheques, and that is something no institution in this book has ever been willing to do voluntarily.

We all love bees don't we? Nobody enjoys getting stung but unlike wasps, who seem to exist purely to ruin a picnic and then sting you on the way out for good measure, bees are busy doing something genuinely essential. They're pollinating. Every time a bee lands on a flower and moves on to the next one it's carrying pollen that allows that plant to reproduce, and when you start looking at the numbers behind that process you realise very quickly that without bees the entire food system falls apart.

One in every 3 mouthfuls of food you eat exists because a bee pollinated it. Fruits, vegetables, nuts, coffee, the alfalfa that feeds dairy cows, all of it depends on pollinators and bees are by far the most important of them. The global economic value of insect pollination is estimated at somewhere between $200 billion and $577 billion every year. These aren't nice to have creatures that add a bit of colour to a garden, they are a load bearing wall in the structure of global food production, and that wall is cracking.

In the United States, beekeepers lost an estimated 55.6 percent of their managed colonies between April 2024 and April 2025. That is the highest annual loss ever recorded. Not a bad year, the worst year since records began. Winter losses alone hit 40.2 percent, well above the average of the previous decade. Across North America, honey bee colonies have declined by a third since the 1940s. The American bumblebee, once found across the entire continent, has seen its population drop by nearly 90 percent in the last 20 years and has vanished completely from at least 8 states. The Rusty Patched bumblebee has lost over 95 percent of its historic range and is now federally listed as endangered.

The causes are well understood. Habitat loss, climate change and parasites all play a role, but the single most discussed factor is a class of pesticides called neonicotinoids, now the

most widely used insecticides in the world. Unlike traditional pesticides that sit on the surface of a plant and wash off, neonicotinoids are systemic, meaning they are absorbed into every part of the plant, the roots, the stems, the leaves, the pollen, the nectar. A bee doesn't have to be sprayed directly. It just has to visit a treated flower and drink the nectar or collect the pollen and the chemical is inside it, attacking its nervous system, impairing its ability to navigate, to learn, to communicate, to find its way back to the hive. One single treated corn seed contains enough neonicotinoid to kill over 80,000 honey bees.

The European Union banned the 3 most common neonicotinoids in 2018 after the European Food Safety Agency concluded they represented a "high acute risk" to honeybees and other pollinators. The United States has not followed suit. The chemical industry, led by the same lobbying structures we've seen in every other chapter of this book, has fought regulation at every turn, funding studies that muddy the waters and pressuring agencies to delay action. The pattern is identical to tobacco, to asbestos, to chromium-6 in the water, cast enough doubt to stall the response while the damage compounds year on year.

The vice president of the American Beekeeping Federation said it plainly: "Current losses are not sustainable. The trend is down, as is the quality of bees. In the long run, if we don't find some answers, we could lose a lot of bees." Farmers in California's almond groves, the largest pollination event in the world, have already struggled to assemble enough healthy colonies to pollinate the crop. The cost of almond pollination alone has nearly tripled since colonies began collapsing in the mid 2000s.

And it's not just the bees.

Coral reefs support roughly 25 percent of all marine species despite covering less than 1 percent of the ocean floor. They are the rainforests of the sea and they are dying. Over half the world's coral reefs have been lost since the 1950s. The Great Barrier Reef has experienced mass bleaching events in 2016, 2017, 2020, 2022 and 2024, each one driven by warming ocean temperatures that force the coral to expel the algae it depends on for food, turning it white and leaving it to starve. If temperatures continue to rise at the current rate, scientists project that 90 percent of the world's coral reefs could be gone by 2050.

Ocean acidification, caused by the seas absorbing excess carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, is dissolving the calcium carbonate that corals need to build their skeletons. The water is literally becoming too acidic for reefs to grow. And as the reefs die, so do the fish that depend on them, and the fishing communities that depend on those fish, and the coastal ecosystems that depend on all of it. It's a chain reaction and every link is connected to the same root cause, an industrial system that treats the natural world as a resource to be extracted rather than a system to be maintained.

Bees in the air, coral in the sea, both collapsing under the weight of an economy that cannot stop taking long enough to notice what it's destroying. The people who make the pesticides know what they do to bees. The companies that burn the fossil fuels know what the emissions do to the ocean. They know, and they carry on, because the quarterly earnings report matters more than whether your grandchildren will live in a world with pollinated crops and living reefs.

Now I'm not here to convince you global warming is real or not. I'm simply going to present some facts that are measured, recorded, and publicly available, and then we're going to look at who benefits most from those facts being believed and who benefits most from them being dismissed. After that you can make up your own mind.

Global sea levels have risen by roughly 8 to 9 inches since 1880. That's measured by tide gauges that have been recorded daily for over a century, and by satellite altimeters since the early 1990s. The rate of rise has accelerated, from 2006 to 2015 it was 2 and a half times faster than the average across most of the twentieth century. NASA's GRACE satellites, which measure shifts in the Earth's gravity caused by mass moving from land to ocean, show that between 2002 and 2025 Greenland lost an average of 264 billion tons of ice per year and Antarctica lost an average of 135 billion tons per year. The rate of ice loss in Antarctica multiplied sixfold over the 30 years leading up to 2020. The Arctic has warmed at 4 times the global average. In March 2025 Arctic winter sea ice hit the lowest maximum extent in the entire 47 year satellite record, and the last 10 years are the 10 warmest on record in the Arctic. Glaciers worldwide lost over 9,000 billion tons of ice between 1961 and 2016. These are not projections or predictions, they are measurements taken by satellites, buoys and monitoring stations operated by NASA, NOAA, the European Space Agency and dozens of national science agencies.

CO2 levels in the atmosphere are currently over 420 parts per million, the highest they have been in at least 800,000 years based on ice core data. The correlation between CO2 concentration and global temperature is one of the most extensively studied relationships in all of science, documented in hundreds of thousands of data points extracted from ice cores drilled in Antarctica and Greenland. When CO2 goes up, temperature follows. When CO2 goes down, temperature follows. It has done this in a consistent pattern for as far back as the data reaches. 2024 was the hottest year in recorded history.

And if you want to see what rising seas look like in practice, look at the people it's already happening to.

Tuvalu is a nation of 9 islands in the Pacific Ocean with an average elevation of just 2 metres above sea level. Sea levels around Tuvalu have risen 6 inches in the last 30 years, one and a half times the global average. NASA projects that by 2050 daily tides will submerge half of its main atoll, where 60 percent of the population lives. In 2021 Tuvalu's Foreign Minister gave a speech to the United Nations climate conference standing knee deep in seawater to show the world what was happening to his country. Nearly half the population has since applied for a first of its kind "climate visa" to relocate to Australia, 280 people per year. An entire nation is preparing to leave its home.

Kiribati, another Pacific island nation, has already lost 2 islands, Abanuea and Tebua Tarawa, which disappeared beneath the surface in 1999. The government bought 22 square kilometres of land in Fiji as an escape plan for its 116,000 citizens. The Marshall Islands, the Maldives, parts of the Solomon Islands, all of them face the same threat. These are countries that contribute virtually nothing to global emissions yet are the first to pay the price.

I should note, because this book exists to be honest, that some studies have found coral atolls can grow through sand accretion and that certain island land areas have actually expanded in recent decades. The science on individual islands is more nuanced than the

headlines suggest. But the broader trend in sea levels, in ice loss, in temperature, in CO2 concentration, is not in serious scientific dispute. The measurements come from every major space agency and climate institution on the planet and they all point the same direction.

So here's where it gets interesting. Rather than telling you what to believe, let's just look at who makes money from each side of this argument and you can decide for yourself who has the bigger incentive to bend the truth.

In 2023 the global oil and gas industry earned a total income of more than $2.7 trillion. The 5 biggest oil companies alone, ExxonMobil, Chevron, Shell, TotalEnergies and BP, made $102 billion in profit in 2024 and paid out $113.8 billion in dividends and share buybacks to their shareholders in 2023, the largest payout to shareholders in the history of the oil industry, and it happened during the hottest year ever recorded. Of all that money, just 4 percent of capital expenditure went toward clean energy. Oil companies collectively spend around 2 and a half percent of their capital on green power. A 2025 study published in Nature found that across 250 of the largest oil and gas companies, renewable energy represents a tiny fraction of total energy production, and about half of their supposed contribution to renewables came from buying existing renewable companies rather than building anything new.

Now look at the other side. The global renewable energy industry is growing but it is still vastly smaller. In 2022 the total profits of every listed renewable energy company on earth were less than 2 percent of the profits made by oil and gas. In the United States the ratio was even starker, renewable energy company profits were a quarter of 1 percent of oil and gas profits. The world currently invests about $1.7 trillion a year in clean energy compared to $1.1 trillion in fossil fuels, so the investment is shifting, but the profit margins in renewables are in the single digits compared to the extraordinary returns oil companies generate.

So ask yourself this. On one side you have an industry making $2.7 trillion a year that would lose almost everything if the world moved away from fossil fuels. On the other you have an industry making a fraction of that which would gain from the transition. The oil industry has spent decades funding think tanks, lobbyists and campaigns designed to cast doubt on climate science, and internal documents from companies like ExxonMobil have shown that their own scientists understood the link between fossil fuels and warming as far back as the 1970s and 1980s. They knew, and they funded doubt anyway, because the profits were too large to let a few degrees of warming get in the way.

The renewable energy industry has its own interests of course. They stand to gain enormously from a shift away from fossil fuels and they lobby governments for subsidies and favourable policies just like any industry does. I'm not pretending they're saints. But when you line up the numbers and ask who has more to lose from the truth, the answer isn't close. One side is protecting a $2.7 trillion annual income. The other is trying to build something that isn't yet a tenth of that size. One side knew the science was real and buried it. The other side is asking you to look at the same science and act on it.

I'll leave that with you.

I've mentioned several times that I love a good documentary and some of the most hard hitting ones over the years have been about how far corporations are prepared to go in the name of profit. It's honestly enough to make you question how people can get to this point, how someone can sit in a boardroom and sign off on a decision that they know will poison other human beings and then go home and have their tea as though nothing happened. But they do and they have. Let's look at some of the stories that stand out, and these are only a fraction of what's out there.

In 1952 the Pacific Gas and Electric Company, known as PG&E, built a compressor station in a small town called Hinkley in the California desert. Between 1952 and 1966 they used a chemical called hexavalent chromium, also known as chromium-6, in their cooling tower system to prevent corrosion. When they were done with it they dumped the waste water into unlined ponds and let it seep into the ground. Chromium-6 is a known carcinogen,ilt causes cancer. PG&E knew what it was and they knew what it did and they dumped it anyway because lining the ponds would have cost money.

For decades the people of Hinkley drank the water, bathed in the water, gave it to their children, and got sick. Cancers, miscarriages, organ failure. Chronic illness across the entire community and nobody told them what was in the water. Nobody tested it, nobody warned them. It wasn't until 1993 that a legal clerk called Erin Brockovich, working for a small law firm in Los Angeles, started looking into why so many people in one tiny desert town were so ill. She went door to door, she talked to the residents, she pulled the records, and she found the connection. PG&E had poisoned the water and the people of Hinkley had been drinking it for over 40 years.

The case went to court and in 1996 PG&E settled for $333 million, at the time the largest settlement in a direct action lawsuit in US history. Julia Roberts won an Oscar playing Brockovich in the 2000 film. Most people know the story from the movie, what most people don't know is what happened after.

Chromium-6 is still in the drinking water of over 200 million Americans across all 50 states. That's two thirds of the population. California passed a law in 2001 requiring regulators to set a safe standard for chromium-6 in drinking water by 2004. It is now 2026 and the process is still not finished. The chemical industry, led by the American Chemistry Council, lobbied the EPA to delay its own review. An external review panel was brought in to assess the science and it later emerged that 3 of the panel's members had consulted for PG&E during the Brockovich case. A key Chinese study that had originally found a strong link between chromium-6 and stomach cancer was mysteriously revised to reverse its findings, and when investigators tried to find out why, the scientist who revised it was dead. It turned out the revision had been written by a consulting firm working for PG&E. There is still no federal regulation specifically limiting chromium-6 in drinking water. The limit that does exist, set in 1991, covers all forms of chromium and was based on skin reactions, not cancer. It hasn't been updated since.

PG&E knew about it but they dumped it anyway. People got cancer, one law firm got a settlement. And 30 years later 200 million people are still drinking the same chemical because the industry that profits from it has spent decades making sure nobody regulates it.

Now let's look at DuPont. For decades DuPont manufactured a chemical called PFOA, perfluorooctanoic acid, one of the key ingredients in Teflon and hundreds of other everyday products. PFOA belongs to a class of chemicals known as PFAS, sometimes called "forever chemicals" because they don't break down in the environment or in your body. They accumulate and they stay.

At their plant in Parkersburg, West Virginia, DuPont dumped PFOA into the local water supply for years. Internal documents later revealed that the company had known PFOA was hazardous for decades. They knew it was contaminating the water, they knew it was making people ill but they said nothing. It took a local farmer called Earl Tennant, whose cattle were dying in ways nobody could explain, and an attorney called Rob Bilott, who spent years piecing together what DuPont had done, to force the truth into the open. That story became the film Dark Waters.

One woman in the area won a $1.6 million settlement against DuPont for kidney cancer caused by PFOA exposure. She was one of tens of thousands of people whose water had been poisoned. Over 3,000 others are suing but here's the kicker they say it could take "the best part of a century" to try all the cases. A century! DuPont poisoned people's water, knew it was doing it, hid the evidence, and now the legal system will take a hundred years to work through the consequences. Meanwhile PFAS chemicals are in the blood of almost every American alive. They can pass from mother to unborn child in the womb and to this day neither DuPont nor other manufacturers of PFOA have disclosed every location where the chemical was made, used or dumped.

Then there's Flint, Michigan. In 2014 the city switched its water supply from Detroit's system to the Flint River to save money. The river water was 19 times more corrosive than the previous supply and it ate through the city's old lead pipes, leaching lead directly into the drinking water. Lead is a neurotoxin, it damages children's brains. There is no safe level of lead exposure in children, none, every health authority on earth agrees on that.

Residents complained immediately, they could see with their own eyes the water was brown and it smelled bad. They had to watch as their children were getting rashes. Nevertheless officials told them it was fine. For over a year the city and state denied there was a problem while the people of Flint, a majority Black city with a poverty rate above 40 percent, drank water laced with lead. It wasn't until independent researchers from Virginia Tech and a local paediatrician called Dr Mona Hanna-Attisha tested the children's blood and found elevated lead levels that the cover-up was finally exposed. By then the damage was done, thousands of children had been poisoned.

A settlement of $626 million was eventually reached. Some officials faced criminal charges, most of which were dropped or resulted in minor consequences. Nobody went to prison for poisoning a city's children, nobody ever does and that's the point. The company dumps, the people get sick, the company denies, the people sue, the company delays as long as humanly possible, a settlement arrives years or decades later, and nobody responsible ever sees the inside of a cell. It happens in Hinkley. It happens in Parkersburg. It happens in Flint. It happens everywhere, because the system that's supposed to prevent it is funded by the people doing it, and the penalties, when they come at all, are treated as a cost of doing business rather than a consequence of a crime.

These are 3 stories. There are hundreds more. Camp Lejeune, Love Canal, the Tennessee coal ash spill, the list goes on and on and every one of them follows the same arc. A corporation makes a decision that prioritises profit over human life, the damage accumulates in silence, ordinary people pay with their health, and the institution responsible either delays accountability until the victims are dead or settles for an amount that barely dents its quarterly earnings. And then it happens again somewhere else because nothing structurally changed, nobody structurally made it change, and the incentives that caused it in the first place are still exactly where they were.

So let's end this chapter with the food we eat. Carnivore, pescatarian, vegetarian or vegan, nobody really escapes what's about to follow, but if you're a carnivore you might be shocked about what you're about to read. Or you could be at the point where you know exactly what's coming and you've been waiting for someone to say it out loud.

The World Health Organisation operates an agency called the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the IARC, whose job is to evaluate substances and determine how likely they are to cause cancer in humans. They classify everything into groups based on the strength of the evidence. Group 1 is the top category. It means there is sufficient evidence from studies on humans that the substance causes cancer. Group 1 includes tobacco smoking. It includes asbestos. It includes plutonium and mustard gas and formaldehyde.

It also includes processed meat.

In 2015 the IARC reviewed over 800 studies from around the world and concluded that processed meat, meaning anything that has been salted, cured, smoked, fermented or chemically preserved, causes colorectal cancer in humans. Bacon, sausages, ham, hot dogs, salami, corned beef, beef jerky, all of it, Group 1, the same classification as cigarettes. They found that every 50 grams of processed meat consumed daily, that's roughly 2 slices of bacon or 1 hot dog, increases the risk of colorectal cancer by approximately 18 percent. Associations with stomach cancer were also observed. Red meat, meaning beef, pork, lamb and mutton, was classified as Group 2A, probably carcinogenic to humans, based on limited evidence linking it to colorectal, pancreatic and prostate cancer.

Now before anyone panics, the IARC was careful to point out that Group 1 describes the strength of the evidence, not the level of risk. Tobacco is far more dangerous than bacon in terms of how many people it kills. Smoking causes roughly 1 million cancer deaths a year. Processed meat is linked to approximately 34,000 cancer deaths a year worldwide according to the Global Burden of Disease Project. But the point isn't that a bacon sandwich is as dangerous as a packet of cigarettes. The point is that the evidence it causes cancer is just as strong, and yet one of them has health warnings on every packet, is banned from advertising on television, can't be sold to children, is taxed at eye watering rates and is socially stigmatised to the point where you have to stand outside in the rain to consume it, while the other is in every school canteen, every hospital cafeteria, every fast food restaurant, every petrol station and every supermarket meal deal in the country, with no warning label in sight.

And it doesn't stop at processed meat. Ultra-processed foods, the stuff that fills the middle aisles of every supermarket, the ready meals, the crisps, the sweetened cereals, the fizzy drinks, the frozen pizzas, the biscuits and the snack bars, now make up over 50 percent of the average daily calorie intake in both the UK and the United States. More than half of everything people in these 2 countries eat has been industrially manufactured with added emulsifiers, sweeteners, colourings, preservatives and flavour enhancers. A 2023 IARC study involving 266,666 people across 7 European countries found that higher consumption of ultra-processed foods was associated with an increased risk of developing cancer and cardiometabolic diseases. A UK Biobank study of nearly 200,000 British adults found consistent links between ultra-processed food consumption and colorectal, breast and pancreatic cancer. The mechanisms go beyond the nutritional content of the food itself, the industrial processing creates compounds that may be carcinogenic, the additives may be carcinogenic, and even the packaging can leach chemicals with endocrine disrupting properties into the food before you've opened it.

In 2023 the IARC also classified aspartame, the artificial sweetener found in thousands of products from diet drinks to chewing gum, as Group 2B, possibly carcinogenic to humans. Not the same strength of evidence as processed meat but enough to raise a flag, and this is a substance that has been marketed as the healthy alternative to sugar for decades.

The WHO announced in November 2025 that it is developing the first ever global recommendations on ultra-processed food consumption. The fact that it has taken until 2025 to even begin that process tells you everything about how slowly institutions move when the industry being regulated has the resources to slow them down.

And the resources are considerable. The global food industry is enormous and the companies that dominate ultra-processed food production, the Nestlés, the Unilevers, the Kraft Heinz, the PepsiCos, have the same lobbying infrastructure, the same revolving door with regulators, and the same playbook of funding favourable research and casting doubt on unfavourable research that we've seen in tobacco, in oil, in chemicals, in every chapter of this book.

We started this chapter with a man who wanted to give the world free energy and was left to die in a hotel room while the man who wanted to sell it became a hero. We've travelled through oil, through farmland, through bees and coral and melting ice and poisoned water and the food on your plate, and in every case the story is the same. Someone knew. Someone profited. Someone else paid the price. And the institutions that were supposed to protect us were either too slow, too compromised, or too well funded by the people doing the damage to do anything about it until long after the harm was done.

I'm going to end this chapter with this: every human being on earth produces roughly 50 kilograms of waste per year. Not rubbish, the other kind. And that waste is packed with nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, which happen to be the 3 nutrients that plants need most to grow. It is, in the most literal sense, free fertiliser. Urine alone contains about 4 kilograms of nitrogen per person per year, and studies have shown it performs comparably to the commercial fertilisers that farmers spend thousands of pounds on every season.

So what do we do with it? We flush it into drinking-quality water, mix it with industrial chemicals, pump it through miles of underground pipes to treatment plants, spend enormous amounts of energy cleaning the water, and then discharge what's left into rivers and the sea. But even the cleaned water still contains the nitrogen and phosphorus we just spent all that effort trying to remove, and when it reaches the waterways it over-fertilises them, triggering algae blooms that suffocate marine life. Meanwhile, back on the farm, the farmer buys synthetic fertiliser manufactured using fossil fuels to replace the exact same nutrients we just flushed away. We take free fertiliser, contaminate it, spend a fortune cleaning it, dump it where it causes damage, and then pay again to manufacture a replacement. That is the system we built. That is what passes for modern civilisation.

This isn't a new idea. In 18th century Japan, villages went to court over who had the rights to collect human waste. It was so valuable that the excrement of wealthy families sold for higher prices because their diet was richer in nutrients. China, Korea and Japan all used it extensively in rice farming for centuries. The Aztecs built their chinampas, floating garden islands constructed from mud, vegetation and human waste, and harvested crops from them up to 7 times a year. Ancient Athens had a sewage system that channelled the city's waste directly to the farmland in the Cephissus river valley. In medieval Britain spreading human waste on fields was common practice. For most of human history, the cycle was simple. You eat food. The food becomes waste. The waste feeds the soil. The soil grows food. A circle.

What we have now is a straight line, and it's heading for a wall. Phosphorus, one of those 3 essential nutrients, is mined from phosphate rock. It's non-renewable. Peak phosphorus is predicted to hit around 2033. After that, supply declines, prices rise dramatically, and food production costs go through the roof. Without mined phosphate, conventional farming yields could be cut in half. And here's the thing that should make you want to scream. Studies suggest that if we properly recovered the phosphorus from human waste globally, it could meet 22 percent of total demand. Britain already recycles 77 percent of its sewage back onto agricultural land as treated biosolids, about 1 million tonnes of dry solids per year. It's regulated, it's treated, it works. We just don't like admitting it.

We are flushing a non-renewable resource down the toilet, spending billions to clean the mess it makes, buying a synthetic replacement manufactured with fossil fuels, and watching the clock tick down to the moment when the raw material runs out. And all of this because at some point somebody decided that the natural cycle that sustained agriculture for thousands of years was beneath us. That we were too civilised for it. That progress meant replacing something that worked perfectly with something expensive, wasteful, polluting and finite, and calling it an improvement.

National Debt

Now I'm deliberately going to keep this chapter short because honestly there is very little point delving into the specific details of national debt. It is what it is. The numbers are so large they've become abstract, the mechanisms are deliberately opaque, and the deeper you dig the more you realise that the system was designed to be difficult to understand on purpose. So I'm going to lay out what I've found as simply as I can and leave it there for everyone to make their own minds up and do any additional digging they like.

The UK national debt currently stands at around £2.9 trillion. That's 97.7 percent of GDP, meaning the country owes almost as much as it produces in an entire year. The interest payments alone are between £111 and £126 billion a year. To put that in context, the entire NHS budget is around £180 billion. So roughly two thirds of what we spend on keeping every person in this country alive and healthy is being spent just on servicing the interest on money we've already borrowed. Not paying it back, just paying for the privilege of owing it.

The United States owes $39 trillion. Japan owes 234 percent of its entire GDP. Global public debt, the total owed by every government on earth combined, has now exceeded $100 trillion.

So here's the question that nobody seems to want to answer clearly. Who do we owe it to?

When a government spends more than it collects in tax it runs a deficit. To cover that deficit it borrows money by selling bonds, which in Britain are called gilts. These are essentially IOUs. You give the government money now, the government promises to pay you back later with interest. Simple enough. But who's buying?

In the UK about a third of the debt is owed to ourselves, roughly a quarter sits with the Bank of England through a process called quantitative easing, which is a polite way of saying the central bank created money and used it to buy the government's own debt, and around £172 billion is held by National Savings and Investment. So a chunk of it is the government owing money to itself, which already sounds a bit odd when you say it out loud.

The remaining two thirds is where it gets murky. Pension funds, investment funds, banks, insurance companies, foreign investors, they all hold gilts. Around 30 percent of UK government debt is held overseas. But when The London Economic filed a Freedom of Information request asking the UK Debt Management Office to name the specific companies and entities that hold our national debt, the response was remarkable. They said "it can be difficult to identify the legal holders themselves, as gilts are often purchased through a subsidiary account of a larger entity." They went on to explain that the registered legal holder may not even be the underlying beneficiary, and that the beneficiary may be based in a different country to the registered holder.

In other words, we owe £2.9 trillion and we're not entirely sure who to.

What we do know is that the usual names appear. BlackRock, Fidelity, State Street, the same institutions that keep showing up in every chapter of this book, all openly advertise their investments in UK government debt. Belgium holds £197 billion worth of British gilts, which sounds bizarre until you learn that Brussels is home to the clearing houses that act as

intermediaries for international bond trades, so the real owners could be anywhere. In the US the picture is slightly clearer but no less absurd. Warren Buffett through Berkshire Hathaway is the single largest non-government holder of US Treasury bills at $314 billion. Japan holds $1.2 trillion of American debt. The UK holds $779 billion. China has been gradually selling its US holdings for years.

Every country on earth is in debt. The combined governments of the world owe over $100 trillion. So who does everybody owe? The answer is financial institutions, investment funds, central banks, and other governments who are themselves in debt to the same types of institutions. It's circular. Country A owes money to banks in Country B. Country B owes money to funds in Country C. Country C owes money to investors in Country A. And somewhere in the middle of all of it, interest is being collected by people whose names we're not allowed to know, on money that in some cases was created out of thin air by central banks and lent back to the governments that created them. If you described this system to someone who'd never heard of it they'd think you were making it up.

And the interest on all of this debt isn't free money floating in space. It comes from taxes. Your taxes. Every pound the government spends on debt interest is a pound it can't spend on hospitals, schools, housing or anything else. When politicians tell you there's no money for public services but there's always money for debt repayments.

Which brings us to where it all started.

The City of London, often called the Square Mile, is a 1.12 square mile area in the centre of London that operates as its own entity. It has its own government, the City of London Corporation, which predates Parliament and is the oldest local government in Britain. It has its own Lord Mayor, separate from the Mayor of London. It has its own police force, the City of London Police, separate from the Metropolitan Police. It has its own flag, its own coat of arms, and its own set of ancient rights guaranteed in Magna Carta, clause IX, which remains in statute to this day. When the monarch enters the City of London they are traditionally met at the boundary by the Lord Mayor in a ceremony that acknowledges the City's historic autonomy. Only 8,600 people live there but 678,000 work there every day, and unlike any other local authority in Britain, businesses in the City of London get to vote in its elections, not just residents. The financial institutions don't just work in the Square Mile, they help govern it.

The City of London also has an official called the Remembrancer, an ancient post whose role is to sit in Parliament and monitor any legislation that might affect the City's interests. So think about that for 1 second, the financial district of London has its own representative, embedded inside Parliament, watching every piece of law that passes through to make sure it doesn't inconvenience the people who run the money.

And here's the connection that ties it all together. National debt as we know it began in the 1690s when William III needed money to fight a war against France. He turned to a syndicate of City of London merchants and asked them to raise the funds. They did, and in return they were granted a royal charter. That syndicate became the Bank of England. The institution that manages the country's money supply, sets interest rates, and holds a quarter of the national debt was born out of a deal between the Crown and a group of private financiers in the Square Mile. The gilts are traded there. The institutions that own the debt

are headquartered there. The Remembrancer watches Parliament from there. And the whole arrangement has been running, in one form or another, for over 300 years.

I said I'd keep this short and I will. I'm not going to pretend I fully understand every mechanism of how national debt works because I don't think anyone outside of a fairly small circle truly does, and I suspect that's by design. But what I can see clearly enough is the shape of the thing. Governments borrow money from financial institutions, pay those institutions interest out of public taxes, cut public services when the interest bill gets too high, and the people who lend the money get to sit in the room where the rules are written. If that sounds like the same pattern we've seen in every other chapter of this book, that's because it is.

Welfare & Pensions

The same government that gave this country its most beloved institution, the NHS, also introduced something else in those post-war years, something that still divides opinion in Britain to this day, the welfare state.

But before we get into how it works now and what's been done to it, it's worth understanding what life was like before it existed, because most of the people who have the strongest opinions about welfare have no idea what they're actually arguing to go back to.

Before the welfare state, if you lost your job and couldn't find another one, you had 15 weeks of means-tested unemployment benefit if you were lucky. After that you were on your own. If you couldn't pay your rent you ended up in a workhouse, renamed "Public Assistance Institutions" in 1930 but still workhouses in everything but name. At the outbreak of the Second World War nearly 100,000 people were living in them, including over 5,000 children. If you got sick and couldn't afford a doctor you didn't see one. If you were old and had no savings you were destitute. By the end of 1930, unemployment had hit 2.5 million and the government's response was to cut public spending, cut wages and raise taxes on the people who could least afford it. There were soup kitchens in the 1930s. There was genuine, visible, widespread hunger in one of the richest countries on earth.

In 1942, in the middle of a war, a man called William Beveridge published a report that changed everything. He identified what he called the 5 Giant Evils standing in the way of a decent society: Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness. The report proposed a system of social insurance, funded by flat-rate contributions from workers, that would provide support from the cradle to the grave. No more workhouses. No more means-tested humiliation. If you paid in while you could work, you'd be looked after when you couldn't. The public response was extraordinary. Half a million copies were sold. Queues formed outside the government bookshop. It was the most popular official report in British history and it formed the foundation for the welfare state that Labour built after winning the 1945 election by a landslide.

That system, for all its flaws, transformed the lives of millions of people. It wasn't perfect and Beveridge himself would have been the first to say so, but it meant that for the first time in this country's history, losing your job or getting ill didn't have to mean losing everything.

I know this because I've been there.

About 12 months after starting my business I needed help. I'd gone a full year with no wages and things were looking dire. The business was growing but it wasn't paying me yet, every penny was going back in, and we were running out of road. My wife was at university and working part time. So I turned to the government for some support. We got around £700 a month to live on. Rent alone was £600 but my friend who owned the flat said not to worry about it, he'd be ok until I was on my feet. This is the same friend who said earlier in the book "mate, if anyone can make this work it's you." Without that friendship, without that one person saying don't worry about the rent, what would I have done? Closed the business? Got a job stacking shelves? Lost over £100,000 in investment and 2 years of my life? And even with the rent taken care of, £700 a month doesn't go far. Electric and gas were the best

part of £200. Food for 2 of us, another £200 minimum. Car insurance, fuel, phone, the basics. There was nothing left. There was nothing to gain from being on benefits. It was survival, not lifestyle.

And that's the lie that needs confronting head on, because this idea that people on welfare are living some comfortable existence at the taxpayer's expense doesn't survive 5 minutes of contact with the actual numbers.

A couple aged 25 or over with 1 child currently receives a Universal Credit standard allowance of £617.60 a month, plus a child element of £287.92. That's £905.52 a month for a family of 3 before housing costs, which works out at roughly £209 a week or about £30 a day. Thirty pounds a day to feed, clothe and look after 2 adults and a child, cover energy, water, council tax top-ups, transport, phone, school costs, and everything else that comes with keeping a household running. The average rent for a 2 bedroom property outside London is somewhere between £700 and over £1,000 a month. Energy bills are running at £150 to £200 a month. A basic weekly food shop for a family of 3 is at least £70 to £80 if you're careful, closer to £100 if you're not. If you have savings above £16,000 you get nothing at all. If you have savings above £6,000 your payments start being reduced.

So tell me, genuinely, where is the incentive? Where is the comfortable lifestyle? Where is the person choosing this over working? Because when you actually sit down and add up what people receive and what it costs to exist in this country, the gap between the two is not a gap you'd choose to live in. It's a gap you survive in because you have no other option.

And yet the narrative persists. Benefit scroungers, skivers versus strivers. Hardworking families versus those who won't help themselves. It's been drilled into the public consciousness so effectively that millions of working people who are themselves one redundancy or one illness away from needing the same support will sit in front of a television and nod along to the idea that the person down the road on Universal Credit is the reason their taxes are high. Not the corporations paying less tax than their cleaners. Not the banks that crashed the economy. Not the £111 billion a year in debt interest flowing to institutions whose names we're not allowed to know. The person getting £30 a day to feed their kids. That's who we're supposed to be angry at.

And if the amount isn't punishment enough, the sanctions system makes sure of it.

Universal Credit operates on a regime of conditions. You must attend appointments, you must prove you're looking for work, you must meet the requirements set out in your "claimant commitment." If you fail to meet any of those conditions, even once, your benefits can be sanctioned, meaning reduced or stopped entirely. Miss a single Jobcentre appointment and you can lose your income. Not some of it. All of it.

David Clapson was a 59 year old former soldier who suffered from type 1 diabetes. After missing 2 Jobcentre appointments his benefits were stopped. He was found dead in his flat. His stomach was empty. There were 6 tea bags and an out-of-date tin of sardines in his kitchen. There was no electricity to power the fridge that kept his insulin cold. Near his body was a pile of freshly printed CVs. He had been looking for work right up until the end. He died in 2013, 2 weeks after his money was cut off.

Errol Graham was severely mentally ill and had been receiving incapacity benefit, then Employment and Support Allowance, for years. When he missed a work capability assessment the DWP tried to contact him by phone and visited his home twice. He didn't respond because he had cut off all contact with the outside world, which is what severe mental illness can do to a person. The DWP stopped his benefits anyway. Because his Employment and Support Allowance was stopped, his housing benefit was automatically cancelled too. Deprived of all income, unable to ask for help, he slowly starved to death in his Nottingham flat. When bailiffs broke down his door in June 2018 to evict him for non-payment of rent, he weighed 4 and a half stone. There was no food in the flat, no credit on the gas or electricity meters, and an unsent letter to the DWP was found that said "please judge me fairly."

Jodey Whiting took her own life in 2017 after her benefits were stopped. Her family are still fighting through the courts for a second inquest to examine the DWP's role in her death. Philippa Day was found collapsed at her home in 2019 beside a letter rejecting her request for an at-home benefits assessment. She had been diagnosed with unstable personality disorder and had previously told people the benefits system made her feel "inhuman." An inquest found 28 errors in the handling of her case.

These are not isolated incidents. A BBC investigation identified 82 claimant deaths linked to DWP activity. Mental health vulnerabilities were a contributing factor in 35 of them. The DWP's own internal reviews, which were kept secret for years and only came to light through Freedom of Information requests by the Disability News Service, found that 1 in 5 of the benefit-related deaths they reviewed involved someone who had been sanctioned. Research by academics at Sheffield Hallam University found that DWP staff and managers had deliberately inflicted psychological harm on claimants, operated unofficial sanctioning targets, and pushed disabled people into distress. The DWP kept all of these findings hidden from Parliament, even while MPs were voting on further cuts to disability benefits.

And here's perhaps the most telling detail of all. Beveridge, the man who designed the welfare state, was explicitly opposed to means testing. He'd seen what it did to people in the 1930s, the humiliation, the intrusion, the poverty trap it created. His whole system was built on the principle that if you contributed while you could work, you'd receive support as of right when you couldn't. No begging. No proving yourself worthy. Universal Credit is means-tested to the penny. It is, in almost every respect, the opposite of what Beveridge intended. The system that was built to protect people from the 5 Giant Evils has been slowly, deliberately, reshaped into something that punishes them for being poor.

Now let's talk about pensions, because this is where the whole thing gets quietly terrifying.

The deal is supposed to be simple. You work for 35 years, you pay National Insurance every month out of your wages, and when you reach state pension age the government pays you a pension. You've paid in, you get something back. That's the understanding most people operate under and it's not entirely wrong, but the reality beneath it is a lot less reassuring than people think.

The National Insurance Fund was established on 5 July 1948, the same day as the welfare state itself. The idea was Beveridge's: a ring-fenced fund, separate from general taxation, into which contributions would flow and out of which pensions and benefits would be paid. Crucially, it was designed as a tripartite scheme. Workers paid in. Employers paid in. And the government, the Exchequer, also paid in. All 3 contributed to keep it healthy. That was the deal. For the first couple of decades it more or less worked as intended. Surpluses built up during periods of high employment, and the fund had enough reserves to ride out leaner years. But from the 1960s and 70s onward, as those surpluses grew, successive governments of both parties started taking what were politely called "contribution holidays," reducing or skipping the Exchequer's own payments into the fund because there was so much money sitting in it. Rather than strengthening the fund for the future, they treated the surplus as an excuse to stop paying in.

Then in 1989, Margaret Thatcher's government went further. It abolished the Exchequer's contribution to the National Insurance Fund entirely. The government simply stopped paying its share into the system it had helped create. The tripartite deal that Beveridge had designed, workers, employers and the state all sharing the burden, was broken. Workers and employers were still paying in every month, but the government had quietly walked away from its side of the arrangement. The recession that followed exposed the problem almost immediately. By 1993, under John Major's government, the fund was struggling and a Treasury grant had to be reintroduced to keep it afloat. That grant continued until 1997 to 1998, covering the tail end of Major and the early months of Tony Blair's first term. So within 4 years of Thatcher pulling the government's contribution, the fund was already in trouble and taxpayers were bailing it out through the back door.

Under Blair and Gordon Brown through the 2000s, the economy grew, employment rose, and the fund started building up healthy surpluses again. By 2005 the surplus stood at over £34 billion. By 2006 to 2007 it had reached £38 billion. The Government Actuary's Department forecast it would grow to over £114 billion by 2012. On paper the fund looked strong, stronger than it had been in decades.But it was an illusion. Because every penny of that surplus was "invested" in government securities through the Debt Management Office, which is a technical way of saying it was lent back to the government at low interest rates. The government took the surplus, spent it on whatever it liked, and left an IOU in the fund. It wasn't savings. It wasn't invested in anything that would generate real returns. It was lent to the very institution that was supposed to be protecting it, and spent.

That forecast of £114 billion by 2012 never materialised. It was quietly revised due to what the Government Actuary's Department called "errors in assumptions," and by 2016 the projected surplus had been downgraded to just £30 billion. By 2014 to 2015, under David Cameron's government, the fund had fallen below the recommended minimum working balance and needed a Treasury supplement to keep it going. The last time such a top-up was needed was 2015 to 2016 and then the final act. By 2018 to 2019, under Theresa May's government, the entire accumulated surplus of £30 billion had been absorbed into the Consolidated Fund, which is the government's general spending pot, and spent. Every penny. Gone. Decades of surpluses, built up from millions of workers' contributions, lent to the government and never returned. The cupboard was bare.

So to lay this out plainly: Attlee's government created the fund in 1948 with all 3 parties contributing. Governments of both colours took contribution holidays through the 60s and 70s when surpluses built up. Thatcher abolished the government's contribution altogether in 1989. Major had to reintroduce emergency grants within 4 years because the fund couldn't cope. Blair and Brown presided over a period where the surplus grew to £38 billion but it was all lent back to the government and spent. Cameron's government watched the fund fall below minimum. And by 2018 to 2019, under May, the accumulated surplus was completely gone. Nobody's hands are clean. Every government that has had access to this fund has taken from it, and not one of them has ever built it into something that could genuinely sustain the pensions it promises.

The fund now operates hand to mouth. Around £100 billion flows in each year from contributions and roughly £100 billion flows out in pension and benefit payments, with 95 percent of that going on the state pension alone, which cost over £110 billion in 2022 to 2023. The Government Actuary has stated plainly that the fund is not sustainable in the long term through NI contributions alone, primarily because of an ageing population. More people drawing pensions, fewer workers paying in, and a fund with no reserves because the reserves were borrowed and spent years ago.

So when people say "I've paid in all my life, I deserve my pension," they're absolutely right in principle. But the money they paid in isn't there. It was never saved. It was never invested. It was spent the year it arrived, and when there was a surplus it was spent too, and now the only thing keeping the system running is the hope that tomorrow's workers will keep paying in fast enough to cover what today's pensioners are owed

National Insurance isn't optional. If you're employed and earn above the threshold, currently around £12,570 a year, it's deducted from your wages automatically before you even see the money. You have no choice. You can't opt out. It leaves your pay packet every month for your entire working life and here's where most people's understanding of it falls apart, because if you asked the average person in the street what their National Insurance pays for, the most common answer would be the NHS. It's right there in the name, National Insurance, and it feels like a health insurance contribution. Others would say it pays for benefits and welfare. Both of those answers are partially right but they miss the biggest piece of the picture.

National Insurance actually funds 3 things. The largest share goes into the National Insurance Fund, which pays for the state pension and contributory benefits like Jobseeker's Allowance, Employment and Support Allowance, and Maternity Allowance. A second allocation, roughly 20 percent of NI receipts, goes directly to the NHS, which came to £34.8 billion in 2024 to 2025. In 2003 Tony Blair raised NI by 1 percent specifically to increase NHS funding, and in 2022 there was a short-lived Health and Social Care Levy that added 1.25 percent to NI for exactly the same purpose before it was scrapped later that year by Kwasi Kwarteng. The remainder goes toward other elements of the welfare system.

So your National Insurance contributions are being split 3 ways before they even arrive anywhere, and none of those 3 destinations involves putting money aside for your future. The portion that goes to the NHS is spent immediately on today's patients. The portion that goes to benefits is spent immediately on today's claimants. And the portion that goes to the

state pension is spent immediately on today's pensioners. There is no pot. There is no savings account with your name on it slowly building up over the course of your career. The money goes straight out the door the moment it arrives. Today's workers pay for today's pensioners, today's patients and today's benefit recipients. When today's workers retire, tomorrow's workers will pay for them. As long as there are enough workers paying in to cover everything being drawn out, the system holds. When that balance shifts, and it is shifting, the system starts to crack.

Meanwhile, general taxation, the income tax and VAT and corporation tax that most people think of as "where the government gets its money," also funds a huge portion of public spending including additional NHS funding, welfare top-ups, education, defence, housing and everything else. So the truth is that both National Insurance and general taxation fund both the NHS and the welfare system, the lines between them are blurred to the point of being almost meaningless, and the whole thing is structured in a way that makes it nearly impossible for an ordinary person to work out where their money actually goes. Which, if you've been paying attention to the rest of this book, is probably not an accident.

The full new state pension is £230.25 a week, which is £12,005 a year. That's if you have the full 35 qualifying years of National Insurance contributions. If you have fewer than 10 qualifying years you get nothing at all. The Trussell Trust calculated in 2023 that a single adult in the UK needs at least £29,500 a year for an acceptable standard of living. The state pension pays less than half of that.

The state pension age is currently rising to 67 between 2026 and 2028, and is due to rise again to 68 between 2044 and 2046. Every generation is being asked to work longer before they receive what they were promised. And the accrued obligation, the total amount the government has already committed to paying out in future state pensions based on contributions already made, was estimated at over £4 trillion as of 2015. That's not a forecast, that's money already owed. The government doesn't have it. It will have to come from future taxes and future borrowing, which means future workers and future debt.

To understand what this actually means for a real person, let's follow someone through their entire working life.

Imagine someone born in 1979 who starts work at 21 in the year 2000 on a salary of £18,000. By 2010 they're on £25,000. By 2020 they're on £35,000. By 2030 they're on £45,000. They carry on working, their salary creeps up, and they reach state pension age at 68 in 2047. That's 47 years of paying National Insurance out of every single pay packet.

Over the first decade, earning an average of around £21,500, their NI contributions would total roughly £17,500. Over the second decade, averaging £30,000, roughly £27,000. Over the third, averaging £40,000, roughly £28,000. Over the fourth, averaging £50,000, roughly £29,600. And the final 7 years would add another £21,000 or so. Their total employee National Insurance contributions over a 47 year career come to somewhere around £120,000 to £130,000. But remember, not all of that is even notionally pension money. Roughly 20 percent has gone to the NHS and further portions to other benefits, which means the amount that's theoretically earmarked for their future pension is significantly less than what they've paid in. The rest has already been spent on other people's healthcare and other people's support.

On top of that, their employer also pays National Insurance on their wages, currently at 15 percent. Over the same career the employer's contributions would come to roughly £150,000 to £180,000. That money is part of the cost of employing you but you never see it and you never benefit from it directly. The total NI generated by this one person's working life is somewhere around £270,000 to £310,000.

What do they get back? The state pension, which in today's terms is £12,005 a year. That figure does go up each year under something called the triple lock, which means it rises by whichever is highest out of inflation, average earnings growth, or 2.5 percent. So it won't stay at £12,005 for the duration of their retirement, it will creep up over time. If we assume an average annual increase of around 3 percent over their retirement, someone living to 85 would receive a total of roughly £260,000 to £280,000 over 17 years. If they live to 90, roughly £360,000 to £390,000 over 22 years. That sounds healthier, but remember this person and their employer contributed somewhere around £270,000 to £310,000 over 47 years, a large portion of which goes to the NHS and other benefits before it even reached the pension fund and none of it was ever invested or grown. It was spent the day it arrived. So even with the triple lock increases, they're essentially just getting back roughly what was paid in on their behalf, with no real return on nearly 5 decades of contributions.

What if that money had been invested instead of spent?

Before I go any further I should explain what an index fund is, because I've spent a good portion of this book talking about how the financial system is rigged and how investments can be used to extract money from ordinary people, so it would be dishonest to throw the phrase out without being straight about what it means and what the risks are. An index fund is one of the simplest forms of investment. Rather than paying a fund manager to pick individual stocks and try to beat the market, which most of them fail to do consistently anyway, an index fund simply tracks an entire market. If you invest in a fund that tracks the FTSE 100, for example, you're effectively buying a tiny slice of the 100 largest companies listed on the London Stock Exchange. If those companies go up in value overall, your investment goes up. If they go down, yours goes down too. There's no one making clever decisions on your behalf and charging you a fortune for the privilege, the fund just follows the market, which is why the fees are low.

Over the long term, and this is the important part, stock markets have historically gone up. Not every year, not without some stomach churning drops along the way, and there are no guarantees, but over periods of 30 or 40 years the trend has been consistently upward. A commonly cited long-term average for global stock market returns is somewhere around 7 to 10 percent per year before inflation, and I've used a conservative 5 percent in the calculation that follows to account for inflation and fees. If you'd invested money in a global index fund in 1980 and left it alone until 2025, you'd have done very well despite the crash of 1987, the dot com bust, the 2008 financial crisis and Covid. The key word is time. Over short periods the stock market is a casino. Over long periods it's historically been one of the most reliable ways to grow money, which is precisely why pension funds, insurance companies and sovereign wealth funds invest heavily in them.

Now back to our person. Their employee NI contributions over 47 years totalled roughly £130,000. If that same money had been placed in a basic index fund averaging 5 percent

annual return instead of being sent straight to the Treasury, the early contributions would have had decades to compound. The £17,500 paid during the first decade would have had an average of 42 years to grow, turning into roughly £136,000 on its own. The £27,000 from the second decade, with an average of 32 years, would have grown to about £129,000. The £28,000 from the third decade to about £82,000. The fourth decade's £29,600 to about £53,000. And the final 7 years' £21,000 would have grown to about £25,000. The total pot at retirement would be somewhere in the region of £425,000 and remember, this calculation only uses the employee's contributions. If the employer's NI, another £150,000 to £180,000 over the same career, had gone into the same fund, the pot would be closer to £900,000. Nearly a million pounds from one person's working life.

Lets just look at a pot of £425,000 this could provide an income of well over £20,000 a year, nearly double the state pension, and you'd still have the capital sitting there earning returns, meaning you could draw on it for decades without running out. Instead, that £130,000 went straight out the door the moment it arrived, split between pensions and the NHS and benefits, earning zero return, building zero capital, and the best this person can hope for is £12,005 a year starting at age 68, assuming the system still exists in its current form when they get there, which nobody can guarantee.

Is an index fund risk free? No. Nothing is. Markets crash. Recessions happen. There would be years where the pot went backwards. But the comparison isn't between a guaranteed safe option and a risky one. The comparison is between an index fund that has historically averaged 5 to 10 percent returns over long periods, and a National Insurance system that takes your money, invests it in absolutely nothing, pays it straight out to someone else, and promises you a fraction of it back in 47 years with no pot, no growth, no capital, and no guarantee that the rules won't change again before you get there. One option carries market risk. The other carries political risk. And if the last 80 years of this book have taught us anything, it's which of those 2 risks has historically been more dangerous to ordinary people.

Then there are workplace pensions. For decades the standard in both the public and private sector was what's called a defined benefit pension, sometimes known as a final salary scheme. Your employer guaranteed you a specific pension based on your salary and years of service. The risk sat with the employer. You knew what you were getting.

That model has almost entirely disappeared from the private sector. The vast majority of private sector defined benefit schemes are now closed to new members and many are closed to any further contributions at all. What replaced them is the defined contribution scheme, where you and your employer put money into a pot, that pot is invested in the financial markets, and whatever it's worth when you retire is what you get. The risk has been transferred entirely from the employer to the worker. If the markets do well, your pension might be decent. If the markets crash the year before you retire, tough luck.

Then there are workplace pensions, and this is a completely separate system to the state pension, so it's important not to confuse the two. Your National Insurance, as we've just seen, goes straight to the government and is spent immediately. Not a penny of it is invested. But alongside that, since 2012, there's been a second layer, automatic enrolment requires employers to put eligible workers into a workplace pension on top of their National Insurance contributions. This is different because this money IS invested, it goes into an

actual pot with your name on it, managed by a pension provider. Participation has gone from 47 percent to 79 percent since it was introduced, which sounds like progress until you look at the contribution levels. The minimum is 8 percent of qualifying earnings, split between employer and employee. For someone on a median salary that's building a pot that, unless topped up significantly, is unlikely to provide anything close to a comfortable retirement. And the money in those pots is invested in the same financial markets, managed by the same asset managers, that we've been talking about throughout this book. BlackRock, Fidelity, State Street, the same names, holding your retirement savings alongside government debt, corporate bonds and equities, taking their management fees along the way.

In November 2024 Chancellor Rachel Reeves announced plans to merge smaller pension funds into "megafunds" to unlock up to £80 billion for investment in the UK economy. On the surface that sounds productive but what it really means is that pension money, your money, the money you've been told is being saved for your retirement, is being earmarked to plug gaps in government investment strategy. The line between your pension and the government's spending priorities is getting thinner by the year.

The generation working right now, the people in their 20s, 30s and 40s paying National Insurance and auto-enrolled pension contributions, are being asked to trust a system that has no savings pot for the state pension, that has shifted all the risk of workplace pensions onto them, that keeps raising the age at which they can access what they've paid for, and that is now eyeing their pension funds as a source of investment capital. They are paying for the retirements of the generation above them while being offered no guarantee that anyone will be paying for theirs. And if they dare to question any of it, they're told to be grateful they have a pension at all.

The welfare state was built by people who had seen what happens without one. Workhouses, soup kitchens, children in institutions, the old dying in poverty after a lifetime of work. It was built on the principle that a decent society looks after its people when they can't look after themselves, and that doing so isn't charity, it's the basic contract between a government and the people who fund it. What we have now is a system that pays people less than they need to survive, punishes them for being ill, sanctions them into destitution for missing a single appointment, and keeps the details of who dies and why locked in secret internal reviews that Parliament never sees. Meanwhile the pensions that were supposed to provide dignity in old age have been hollowed out, marketised, and quietly redirected toward purposes that have nothing to do with the people who paid into them.

Beveridge called them the 5 Giant Evils. Want. Disease. Ignorance. Squalor. Idleness. Eighty years later every all of them is still standing. The question isn't whether we need a welfare state, the question is whether the one we have still deserves the name.

Drugs

Many of us have experimented with recreational drugs. I told a story earlier in this book about one incident that went badly wrong, the Xanax, the dark web, the night I thought my wife might not wake up. But there's another side to it that I think most people in my generation would recognise.

In my late 20s and early 30s cocaine was everywhere. Every time I went out someone would be getting it or had it on them. It wasn't hidden, it wasn't whispered about, it was just there, part of the night out, as normal as ordering a round. I tried it, of course I did, but I was never a fan. I found out later in life that I have ADHD and I'd always suspected my experience of it wasn't reflective of most people's, because rather than giving me energy or confidence it actually made me quite boring and serious, which I didn't like at all. Naturally I prefer attempting to be the joker, bringing a bit of positivity when I can, and cocaine took that away from me. I'd sit there like a plank while everyone else was buzzing. Saying no was easier for me than it probably should have been, and quitting altogether wasn't a big deal.

But that's not the case for many people. Once caught in the cycle it can be truly destructive and many lives have been torn apart and destroyed over just this one substance, and that's before I even mention some of the others that are arguably more addictive and more damaging. So how long have humans been experimenting with drugs? The answer might surprise you, because it's not decades or centuries. It's thousands of years. And for most of that time, nobody thought to make them illegal.

Archaeological evidence shows humans were using opium and hallucinogenic mushrooms as far back as 10,000 years ago. Cannabis seeds have been found in archaeological digs dating to 8,100 BCE in Asia. The ancient Sumerians were cultivating the opium poppy around 3,400 BCE and called it the "joy plant" because they knew exactly what it did. The Egyptians used opium to relieve pain. The Greeks prescribed cannabis for medical conditions and drank poppy juice. The Incas chewed coca leaves for stamina and energy long before anyone thought to distil it into powder. Alcohol brewing has been traced back to 7,000 BCE in China. Hallucinogens were used in sacred rituals across South America, with a 1,000 year old stash found in Bolivia containing cocaine, ayahuasca and Anadenanthera, which must have been one hell of a night. Even Marcus Aurelius, the Roman Emperor whose Meditations is still one of the most respected philosophical texts ever written, was almost certainly an opium addict. One historian concluded that rather than incapacitating him, the drug "fired his philosophic insight to the fever pitch of vision."

Humans have been altering their consciousness for as long as we've been human. Every civilisation that has ever existed has used psychoactive substances in some form, whether for medicine, ritual, recreation, or all 3. It is one of the most consistent behaviours in our entire history as a species. So the question isn't why do people take drugs. The question is why, after thousands of years of doing it, did we suddenly decide it should be a crime?

The answer, when you look at it honestly, has very little to do with public health and almost everything to do with race, power and control.

In the 1800s, opium, cocaine and cannabis were all legal and widely available across Britain and America. Cocaine was an ingredient in Coca-Cola. It was in wines, tonics, elixirs and over-the-counter medicines sold in every pharmacy. In 1895 the pharmaceutical company Bayer, yes the same company that makes aspirin, released a new drug they marketed as "safer than morphine." They called it Heroin. Doctors prescribed it freely. By 1900 it's estimated that around 5 percent of the American population was addicted to cocaine, heroin or morphine, and the typical addict wasn't a criminal or a drifter. It was a rural, middle-class white woman who'd been prescribed the stuff by her doctor.

The first sensible piece of legislation was the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906 in the US, which simply required products to list their ingredients on the label. That's it. No bans, no prison sentences, just tell people what's in the bottle. And it worked. Opiate sales dropped by a third almost immediately. People were making informed choices and many of them chose to stop.

But that wasn't enough for some. In 1914 the US Congress passed the Harrison Narcotics Act, which banned the non-medical use of opiates and cocaine. On the surface it looked like a public health measure. Underneath it was something else entirely. The Congressional hearings that built support for the law were drenched in racial propaganda. One doctor testified that "most of the attacks upon white women of the South are the direct result of the cocaine-crazed Negro brain." The media ran stories about Chinese opium dens corrupting white youth. The New York Times published a piece in 1914 headlined "Negro Cocaine Fiends Are a New Southern Menace." The law wasn't designed to protect people from addiction. It was designed to give the state power over communities it wanted to control.

Britain followed a similar path. During the First World War, restrictions were placed on cocaine and opium as part of emergency wartime measures, driven in part by wild media reporting and the racist demonisation of Chinese communities through the depiction of opium dens as sites of corruption. Those temporary restrictions were made permanent in the Dangerous Drugs Act of 1920. Cannabis was added in 1928. And Britain had its own spectacular hypocrisy to answer for, because just decades earlier the British Empire had fought 2 actual wars, the Opium Wars of 1839 to 1842 and 1856 to 1860, specifically to force China to keep accepting opium imports that the Chinese government was trying to ban. Britain went to war to protect its right to sell drugs to another country, then turned around and criminalised its own citizens for using them.

Cannabis was banned in the US state by state from 1911, then federally in 1937 through the Marihuana Tax Act. The timing was not coincidental. The wave of anti-cannabis legislation coincided with a surge of anti-Mexican sentiment during and after the Great Depression. Cannabis was rebranded as "marijuana" specifically to associate it with Mexican immigrants and make it sound foreign and threatening. By the time the federal ban came, all 50 states had already outlawed it.

Then came the escalation. In 1971 Richard Nixon declared a "War on Drugs," calling drug abuse "public enemy number one." In the 1980s Ronald Reagan doubled down, and his wife Nancy launched the "Just Say No" campaign as if addiction were simply a matter of willpower. In 1986 Congress passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Act, which introduced mandatory minimum sentences that were so transparently racist they barely tried to hide it. 5 grams of

crack cocaine, used predominantly in Black communities, carried a mandatory 5 year prison sentence. You needed 500 grams of powder cocaine, used predominantly by white professionals, to get the same sentence. The same drug, 2 different forms, and a 100 to 1 sentencing disparity that devastated an entire generation of Black Americans. That ratio wasn't corrected until 2010, and even then it was only reduced to 18 to 1. Not equal. Just slightly less grotesque.

The war on drugs has been one of the most expensive and destructive policy failures in modern history. The United States alone has spent over $1 trillion on it. And what has it achieved? Global cocaine production has more than doubled since 2014. The area of land in Colombia dedicated to growing coca is now 4 times larger than it was 10 years ago. In the UK, cocaine use has never been higher. We are the largest consumer of cocaine per capita in Europe, the 2nd largest in the world behind Australia. London alone consumes an estimated 23 kilograms of the stuff every day, more than Barcelona, Amsterdam and Berlin combined. Wastewater analysis shows it's not even a weekend drug in London, it's consumed steadily throughout the week. The UK domestic cocaine market is worth an estimated £4 billion a year. Deaths involving cocaine have risen for 13 consecutive years in England and Wales, reaching 1,279 in 2024. And who's using it? This is where it gets interesting, because the narrative we've been sold for decades is that drugs are a problem of the poor, the uneducated, the underclass, the people who made bad choices. The reality is rather different. According to the Office for National Statistics, you're more likely to use cocaine if your household earns over £52,000 a year than if it earns under £10,400. In 2021, traces of cocaine were found in 11 out of 12 washrooms tested inside the Houses of Parliament. Eleven out of twelve. Several MPs told the Sunday Times there is a "culture of cocaine" in government, describing colleagues openly using it at their desks and at parties where journalists were present. The City of London's banking sector has long been identified as a hotbed for cocaine use, with former bankers describing it as "the perfect drug" for their industry because it's expensive, glamorous, and gives your already inflated ego an even bigger puff.

So the builder on a council estate gets a criminal record and a prison sentence. The banker gets a bonus and a taxi home. The MP gets re-elected. The person sanctioned off their benefits for missing a Jobcentre appointment can't even afford to eat, while the person making the laws that sanction them is doing lines in a Westminster toilet. And we're supposed to believe this system is about public health.

There is another way. In 1999, Portugal was in crisis. It had the highest rate of drug-related AIDS in the European Union. Lisbon was known as the heroin capital of Europe. Nearly 1 percent of the entire population was addicted to heroin. Overdose deaths were climbing fast, with 369 recorded in 1999 alone, and everything the government had tried, the arrests, the prison sentences, the crackdowns, had made it worse. So in 2001 they did something radical. They decriminalised the personal possession of all drugs. All of them. Heroin, cocaine, cannabis, ecstasy, everything. This wasn't legalisation, drug trafficking still carried prison sentences and drugs were still confiscated, but personal use was no longer a criminal offence. Instead of being arrested, anyone found with drugs was referred to a 3 person panel made up of a lawyer, a health worker and a social worker, who would assess them and recommend either treatment, a fine, a warning, or no sanction at all.

The results were extraordinary. Overdose deaths dropped by over 80 percent, from 369 in 1999 to just 30 in 2016. New HIV cases from injecting drug use plummeted from 907 in 2000 to 18 in 2017. The number of heroin addicts fell from 100,000 to 25,000. The proportion of the prison population held for drug offences dropped from over 40 percent to 15.7 percent. Drug-related deaths in Portugal fell to 3 per million, compared to the EU average of 17.3 per million. People in Portugal are now 45 times less likely to die from a drug overdose than people in the United States. And the whole programme cost less than $10 per citizen per year. The US spent over $1 trillion in the same period and its overdose deaths now exceed 100,000 annually.

90 percent of people referred to counselling by Portuguese police actually turn up. One former drug user in Portugal told NPR that the police are "our friends" and part of the support network that helps people recover. Compare that with the UK, where the system criminalises, stigmatises and punishes, and then wonders why people don't seek help.Portugal didn't solve every problem. Drug use has risen slightly in some categories and there are signs that some of the early gains are being eroded as investment in treatment services has slipped. It's not perfect. But the core principle, that addiction is a health issue not a criminal one, that treating people with compassion produces better outcomes than treating them with handcuffs, has been proven beyond any reasonable doubt. And yet most of the world, including Britain, continues to double down on the approach that has failed for over a century.

If we look though specifically at cannabis, which might be the most revealing example of all because it shows what happens when the tide of public opinion finally turns and the institutions have to adapt. Cannabis has been used by humans for at least 10,000 years. Ancient Chinese medical texts prescribed it for rheumatism and malaria. The Greeks, the Romans, the Egyptians, cultures across every continent used it in one form or another for medicine, relaxation and ritual. It was legal in Britain and America until well into the 20th century. It was banned as mentioned because of racial prejudice and for the next 80 years it remained illegal almost everywhere, carrying prison sentences that destroyed lives, disproportionately targeting Black and working-class communities, while being quietly enjoyed behind closed doors by politicians, professionals and the comfortably wealthy. Then something started to shift. States in America began legalising cannabis, first for medical use, then recreational. As of 2024, 38 states have legalised it medically and 24 states have legalised it for recreational use. 87 percent of Americans now support legalisation. The US cannabis market is worth an estimated $38.5 billion and growing, contributing over $115 billion to the wider economy in 2024. Cannabis tax revenue now exceeds $25 billion, nearly double what the alcohol industry generates in tax. It has created over 425,000 full-time jobs.

And here's the part that should make you pause. The moment legalisation started gaining momentum, stock market returns for pharmaceutical companies dropped by 1.5 to 2 percent within 10 days of each new state legalising. Investors estimated that a single legalisation event would reduce annual drug company sales by $3 billion on average. Cannabis was competing directly with conventional pharmaceuticals for pain, anxiety, depression and insomnia, and the pharmaceutical industry could see the numbers. A plant that people can grow in their garden was threatening the profit margins of billion-dollar corporations.

So what happened? Big Pharma didn't fight it, they positioned themselves to own it. Industry observers have noted that major pharmaceutical companies, along with big tobacco, are positioning themselves to seize the market the moment federal legalisation arrives. The FDA has already approved cannabis-derived drugs like Epidiolex. Patent filings for new cannabis-based pharmaceutical formulations are rising. The same corporations that spent decades lobbying to keep cannabis illegal are now filing patents to ensure that when it's legal, they control the supply chain, the dosing, the pricing, and the profit. The plant that was demonised for a century because it couldn't be taxed and controlled is now being absorbed into the very system that criminalised it. If that pattern sounds familiar by this point in the book, it should.

And while all of this plays out in the world of policy and profit, there's another conversation happening in the world of science that might be even more significant. And if you think the government's relationship with drugs has always been about protecting the public, you need to know about MKUltra.

In 1953, the CIA launched a top-secret programme called MKUltra, authorised by CIA Director Allen Dulles, with the aim of developing techniques for mind control. The programme was run by a chemist named Sidney Gottlieb and it encompassed over 140 separate subprojects involving LSD, other psychoactive drugs, electroshock therapy, hypnosis, sensory deprivation, isolation, and psychological torture. Gottlieb bought the entire world supply of LSD for $240,000 and began distributing it to prisons, hospitals, universities and military bases across America to see what it did to people.Many of the subjects had no idea they were being experimented on. Thousands of soldiers were given hallucinogenic drugs without their knowledge or consent. Prisoners were dosed with LSD every single day for extended periods. Whitey Bulger, the infamous Boston crime boss, later described how he had been given LSD daily for over a year in prison as part of what he was told was a schizophrenia study. He said the experience was horrific and that he thought he was going insane. "I was in prison for committing a crime," he wrote, "but they committed a greater crime on me." In one subproject known as Operation Midnight Climax, the CIA set up safehouses in San Francisco and New York disguised as brothels. Prostitutes were hired to lure men back to the premises where they were secretly dosed with LSD and observed through one-way mirrors. The logic was that the men would be too embarrassed about where they'd been to ever report what had happened to them.

In Canada, CIA-funded experiments were conducted at the Allan Memorial Institute, a psychiatric hospital at McGill University in Montreal, by a psychiatrist named Donald Ewen Cameron. Cameron used electroshock at up to 75 times the normal intensity, prolonged drug-induced sleep lasting weeks, massive doses of LSD, and a technique he called "psychic driving" which involved forcing patients to listen to repeated recorded messages for up to 16 hours a day. His goal was to erase existing personalities and rebuild them from scratch. He reduced patients to a childlike state. Cameron was simultaneously president of the World Psychiatric Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the Canadian Psychiatric Association. The man running the most abusive psychiatric experiments in the western world was also the most senior psychiatrist on the planet.

In 1953, a US Army biochemist named Frank Olson was secretly dosed with LSD by a CIA colleague at a work retreat. Days later he fell from a 10th storey window and died. The CIA

initially ruled it a suicide. Decades later, after documents were declassified, his family fought for a new investigation. The case has never been fully resolved.

When the programme was finally exposed, the CIA's Director Richard Helms ordered the destruction of all MKUltra files. Most were shredded before investigators could reach them. What we know today comes from a small cache of financial records that survived because they were filed in the wrong place, plus testimony from the 1975 Church Committee hearings and documents obtained through Freedom of Information requests. In 2024, the National Security Archive and ProQuest published over 1,200 declassified records on the programme. When Gottlieb eventually testified before the Senate, he admitted the whole thing had been largely useless, describing it as "probably not a high pay-off program." He estimated the CIA had experienced "as many failures as successes." We don't know how many people died. We don't know how many lives were permanently destroyed. We do know that the agency spent years dosing its own citizens with psychedelic drugs without their consent, torturing psychiatric patients, and experimenting on prisoners and soldiers, all while publicly waging a "war on drugs" that sent ordinary people to prison for possessing the same substances the government was secretly testing on them.

All of this happened after the United States had helped create the 1948 Nuremberg Code, which explicitly required voluntary informed consent for any human experimentation. The CIA knew exactly what the rules were. They just decided the rules didn't apply to them.

I've always been fascinated listening to people's experiences at ayahuasca retreats and with DMT, the kind of deeply personal, often profound accounts that people struggle to put into words afterwards. It's something I've never tried myself, and I'm not going to pretend otherwise, but the consistency of what people report, across cultures, across continents, across completely unconnected individuals, is hard to ignore. The sense of connection to something larger. The dissolution of the ego. The feeling of having accessed a truth that was always there but couldn't be seen. Whether you interpret that spiritually or neurologically, the accounts are remarkably consistent, and science is starting to take it very seriously.

DMT, or dimethyltryptamine, is a naturally occurring psychedelic compound. It's the active ingredient in ayahuasca, the Amazonian brew that indigenous communities have used in ceremonial and healing contexts for centuries. It's also structurally similar to serotonin, one of the brain's own neurotransmitters. Unlike most psychedelics, DMT breaks down quickly in the body, meaning the experience is intense but short, lasting minutes rather than hours.

In February 2026, researchers at Imperial College London published the results of a clinical trial that found a single dose of DMT produced significant and lasting reductions in depression symptoms in people with major depressive disorder, with effects lasting up to 6 months for some participants. Johns Hopkins University in the US has established a dedicated Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research, one of the largest in the world, investigating psilocybin, the compound in magic mushrooms, as a treatment for depression, PTSD, addiction, anorexia, and even Alzheimer's disease. As of mid 2025, over 150 active clinical trials involving psychedelics were registered on ClinicalTrials.gov. Phase 3 clinical trials of MDMA-assisted therapy for PTSD showed response rates of around 80 percent, extraordinary by any measure. In August 2024 the FDA rejected it anyway, citing

concerns about the trial methodology rather than the results. A treatment that could transform the lives of millions of people suffering from PTSD was blocked not because it didn't work but because the institution wasn't satisfied with how the evidence was gathered.

The word psychedelic comes from the Greek psyche, meaning soul, and deloun, meaning to reveal, to make the soul visible. These substances have been used by human beings for thousands of years in exactly that context, as tools for healing, for understanding, for seeing something that the everyday mind can't access. Indigenous cultures knew this. The ancient Greeks knew this. The Sumerians, the Egyptians, the cultures of South America and Central Asia all knew this and for the last century we've been told they're simply dangerous, simply criminal, simply wrong. The science now suggests otherwise. The question, as always, is who gets to control them, who gets to profit from them, and whether the institutions that criminalised these substances for a century will now try to patent them instead.

Media

When I was growing up, the media was simple. You had the newspapers and you had the news on telly. The 9 o'clock news or the 10 o'clock news depending on the channel, that was your window into the world. On a Sunday there was always a News of the World kicking around somewhere, usually with some scoop about a politician or a celebrity being caught doing something embarrassing. My dad would read it cover to cover. Nobody questioned it much. The newspaper told you what had happened, the news reader on the telly confirmed it, and that was that. You trusted it because there wasn't really an alternative. It was the only version of reality you were offered, so you accepted it.

But the media didn't start with newspapers and it didn't start with television. Humans have been trying to record and share information for as long as we've existed. The earliest form of mass communication was probably cave paintings, tens of thousands of years old, essentially instruction manuals showing other humans what was safe to eat and what wasn't. By the 1400s Italian merchants were compiling handwritten newsletters and circulating them to their business contacts, spreading news of trade, politics and war across Europe. Then in 1440, a German goldsmith called Johannes Gutenberg invented the movable type printing press and changed everything.

Gutenberg's press didn't just make books cheaper to produce, it broke the monopoly on information. Before the press, knowledge was controlled by the church and the state, hand-copied manuscripts were expensive and rare, and most people had no access to written material at all. The printing press put information into the hands of ordinary people for the first time and within decades it had helped fuel the Protestant Reformation and the European Renaissance. Martin Luther's ideas only spread because they could be printed and distributed faster than the church could suppress them. It is no exaggeration to say that the printing press was the most disruptive technology in human history until the internet.

The first newspapers appeared in Europe around 1609, with the first English language newspaper arriving in 1620. By the 1830s the "penny press" had emerged, cheap newspapers aimed at the masses rather than the wealthy, built on sensationalism, scandal and murder stories. They were the forerunners of the tabloids. By 1900, newspapers had become powerful institutions in their own right, with major owners using them to push political agendas and shape public opinion.

Then came radio in the 1920s, and for the first time in history huge numbers of people could hear the same event at the same time. This was transformative. During the Second World War, radio became the primary way people followed the conflict, with reporters broadcasting live from the frontlines. Edward R. Murrow's live reports from London during the Blitz are still considered some of the finest journalism ever produced. Radio also gave politicians a direct line to the public, bypassing the newspapers entirely. Franklin Roosevelt's "fireside chats" brought the President's voice into American living rooms and fundamentally changed the relationship between government and citizens.

Television arrived in the late 1940s and by the 1950s and 60s it was the dominant form of mass media. In America, 3 networks, NBC, CBS and ABC, controlled over 90 percent of

what people watched. On some nights close to half the nation was watching the same programme. Television had an extraordinary power to unify, but also to shape. The Vietnam War was the first televised conflict, and nightly footage of the reality of combat helped turn public opinion against the war in a way that newspapers alone could never have achieved. People saw the horror with their own eyes and it changed everything.

Up to this point, for all its flaws, mainstream media operated under a broadly shared set of principles. News organisations were expected to at least attempt impartiality. Journalists were supposed to verify their sources. There was a line, however blurry, between news and opinion. The system wasn't perfect and bias existed, but there was a general understanding that the news was supposed to tell you what happened, not what to think about it. That understanding started to fracture in the 1990s, and the man most responsible for breaking it was Rupert Murdoch.

Murdoch had been building a media empire since the 1950s, starting with newspapers in Australia and expanding into Britain and America. He bought The Sun, The Times, the Wall Street Journal, and built the Sky television network. But his most consequential move came in 1996 when he launched Fox News in the United States. To run it he hired Roger Ailes, a former Republican political strategist who had worked on the campaigns of Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. Ailes didn't come from journalism. He came from politics. And the network he built wasn't a news operation that happened to lean conservative. It was, as one media scholar put it, "a political operation that masks itself as a news channel."

Ailes had conceived the idea years earlier during his time in the Nixon White House, where he wrote a memo called "A Plan for Putting the GOP on TV News." The plan was simple: create a network that looked and felt like news but functioned as a vehicle for conservative messaging, bypassing what Ailes and Murdoch both regarded as a liberal mainstream media. They branded it "Fair and Balanced," which was clever because the slogan itself was the argument, it positioned Fox as the counterweight to an alleged liberal bias in every other news organisation, which gave them permission to be openly partisan while claiming they were simply restoring balance.

The impact was enormous. Fox News became the most watched cable news channel in America and the main profit engine of Murdoch's empire. It helped elect George W. Bush, gave a platform to the Tea Party movement, provided Donald Trump with essentially unlimited positive coverage, and reshaped the entire American media landscape. Other networks tried to copy the model. MSNBC pivoted to the left. CNN tried to occupy the middle. The result was a media ecosystem built entirely around partisan identity, where people chose their news based on which version of reality confirmed what they already believed. Trust in the media collapsed. A University of Georgia professor who studies this said of Ailes: "No single individual has done more harm to American democracy in the last generation. He ushered in the post-truth society."

Ailes was forced to resign in 2016 amid allegations of sexual harassment and died the following year. In 2023, Fox News paid $787.5 million to settle a lawsuit brought by Dominion Voting Systems after the network had broadcast false claims that the 2020 election was stolen. During the proceedings, Murdoch acknowledged under oath that some Fox News

hosts had endorsed claims he knew to be false. The network that built its brand on being the truth-tellers paid over three quarters of a billion dollars because it got caught lying.

And then came the internet, and with it a transformation so fast and so total that we're still trying to understand what it's done to us.

The World Wide Web was invented in 1991 by Tim Berners-Lee, a British scientist working at CERN. Within a decade it had fundamentally changed how humans access information. For the first time, anyone with a connection could publish, share and consume content without needing to own a printing press, a broadcast licence or a distribution network. It was, in principle, the most democratising technology since Gutenberg. And like the printing press before it, the initial explosion of access was extraordinary. People could read newspapers from other countries, access academic research, watch footage the mainstream media wouldn't air, and communicate with strangers on the other side of the world. The gatekeepers had been bypassed.

Then social media arrived and the gatekeepers came back, wearing different clothes.

Facebook launched in 2004 and within a few years it had become the primary way billions of people consumed news, communicated with each other and understood the world. But Facebook wasn't a news organisation. It was an advertising company. Its entire business model was built on keeping people on the platform for as long as possible so they could be shown more adverts. The way it did this was through an algorithm, a set of instructions that decided what each user saw in their feed. And the algorithm didn't prioritise accuracy or importance or truth. It prioritised engagement. Content that generated the most reactions, the most comments, the most shares, got pushed to more people. And it turns out that the content that generates the most engagement is the content that makes people angry, afraid or outraged.

In 2018, the Cambridge Analytica scandal revealed just how far this had gone. A political consulting firm had harvested the personal data of up to 87 million Facebook users without their consent through a personality quiz app. The data was used to build psychological profiles of voters and target them with tailored political messaging during both the Trump campaign and the Brexit referendum. Facebook had known about the data harvesting since 2015, demanded it be deleted, and was told it had been. It hadn't. When the story broke, over $100 billion was wiped off Facebook's market value and Mark Zuckerberg was hauled before Congress to explain himself. Facebook was eventually fined $5 billion by the Federal Trade Commission and paid $725 million to settle a class action lawsuit. Cambridge Analytica went bankrupt. Nobody went to prison.

Then in 2021, a former Facebook data scientist named Frances Haugen walked out of the company with tens of thousands of pages of internal documents and blew the whistle on what she'd seen. Her testimony before the US Senate was devastating. She revealed that Facebook's own internal research showed that Instagram was harming the mental health of teenage girls, that 32 percent of teen girls said that when they felt bad about their bodies Instagram made them feel worse, and that the algorithm was deliberately pushing content related to anorexia and self-harm to vulnerable young users because that content generated engagement. She said the algorithm was "causing teenagers to be exposed to more

anorexia content, pulling families apart, and in places like Ethiopia literally fanning ethnic violence." She said Facebook's leadership knew all of this and repeatedly chose profit over safety. Facebook's response was to call her documents "stolen."

In Britain, the media story played out differently but the pattern was the same. In 2011 the News of the World, the Sunday tabloid that had been a fixture of British life for over 150 years, was shut down after it emerged that journalists had been hacking the phones of celebrities, politicians, and most shockingly the murdered schoolgirl Milly Dowler. They had accessed her voicemail while her family was still desperately searching for her, giving her parents false hope that she was still alive. The Leveson Inquiry that followed exposed a culture of illegal surveillance, bribery of police officers, and a cosy relationship between media owners and politicians that most people had suspected but never seen laid bare. Murdoch himself was called before Parliament. The News of the World closed. Within months it was replaced by the Sun on Sunday, same owner, same building, same operation under a new name.

And now we have TikTok, which is perhaps the most revealing example of all because it shows what happens when a media platform emerges that the existing power structures don't control.

TikTok, owned by the Chinese company ByteDance, launched in 2018 and grew faster than any social media platform in history. By 2024 it had over 170 million users in the United States alone. It became the primary news and culture platform for an entire generation, a place where ordinary people could reach millions of viewers without needing a publisher, a broadcaster, or an algorithm designed by an American technology company. It was also, for the first time, a major media platform that wasn't owned by a Western corporation.

The US government's response was to try to ban it. The stated reason was national security, the concern that ByteDance could be compelled by the Chinese government to hand over user data or manipulate the algorithm to influence American public opinion. In 2024, President Biden signed a bipartisan law requiring ByteDance to sell TikTok's US operations or face a nationwide ban. In January 2025 the Supreme Court unanimously upheld the law. On January 19, 2025, TikTok went dark in America. Twelve hours later it was restored after Donald Trump indicated he'd delay enforcement. Over the following year, Trump delayed the ban 3 separate times while a deal was negotiated.

In January 2026, the deal was finalised. TikTok's US operations were transferred to a new majority American-owned joint venture led by Oracle, with US investors holding 65 percent and ByteDance reduced to less than 20 percent ownership. A board of directors filled with national security advisors and cybersecurity experts was installed. The algorithm, the thing that actually determines what 170 million people see every day, is still licensed from ByteDance, just "reviewed and retrained" under American oversight.

It's worth asking why a government that has never passed a comprehensive data privacy law to protect its own citizens from American technology companies was so urgently concerned about a Chinese one. Facebook harvested the data of 87 million people and used it to manipulate elections. Instagram knowingly harmed teenage girls and chose profit over their safety. Fox News broadcast lies about a presidential election and paid three quarters of a

billion dollars in damages. None of these platforms were banned. None of these companies were forced to sell. The concern, it seems, is not about what's being done with people's data or what's being shown to their children. It's about who's doing it.

Every new form of media in human history has followed the same arc. It emerges as a tool that gives ordinary people access to information and a voice. It disrupts the existing power structures. Those structures resist, then adapt, then absorb it. The printing press was suppressed, then controlled by the state and the church. Radio was commercialised and regulated. Television was consolidated into a handful of corporate networks. The internet was colonised by platforms that turned human attention into a commodity. Social media promised to give everyone a voice and ended up giving the loudest, angriest, and most dishonest voices the biggest megaphone, while the platforms that enabled it collected the data and pocketed the advertising revenue.

The signal keeps trying to get through. And every time it does, someone builds a fence around it, puts a price on it, and tells you it's for your own protection.

Science

I'll be honest, this is my weakest subject by a distance. I was interested in biology at school but only because the teacher was ace. She was always up for a laugh, made it feel like you were learning something without realising you were learning it, and I genuinely looked forward to her lessons. If every teacher had been like her I'd probably have paid a lot more attention to a lot more subjects. But physics, chemistry, the hard sciences, they went over my head and I didn't care enough at the time to do anything about it.

Over the last year though quantum physics caught my attention, purely because I couldn't make head nor tail of what was being said. And I'm a little bit like a rag to a bull these days, if I don't understand something I'll keep digging until I do. This one though, this one is so mind-blowing that it ties in with much more than you might first think.

But before we get to the weird stuff, it's worth asking a simple question about science in general. Has it actually made our lives better?

300 years ago the average life expectancy in Britain was about 35. Childbirth killed roughly 1 in 100 mothers. A cut on your hand could kill you because nobody understood that invisible organisms called bacteria cause disease. Once scientists figured that out, everything changed. Antibiotics could kill the bacteria. Vaccines, tiny doses of a weakened virus that train your immune system to recognise and fight the real thing, wiped out diseases that had terrorised humanity for centuries. Anaesthesia meant surgery was no longer a matter of biting down on a stick and hoping you didn't die from shock. Clean water and sanitation, the simple act of separating what we drink from what we flush, saved more lives than almost any other intervention in history.

Then came the industrial revolution. Steam engines, railways, electricity, telecommunications, flight, computing, the internet. In 200 years we went from horse-drawn carts to landing on the moon. We can see inside a living human body without cutting it open using MRI scanners, machines that use magnetic fields to create detailed images of your organs and bones. We carry more computing power in our pockets than NASA had in 1969. By any measurable standard, science has given us extraordinary capabilities.

But with all of that, are we actually happier? Are we healthier in the ways that matter? Are we more connected to each other or less?

Because the same science that gave us antibiotics gave us biological weapons. The same science that split the atom, breaking apart the tiny particles that make up all matter to release enormous energy, used that energy to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing roughly 200,000 people in 2 days. The same science that built the internet built the surveillance systems that monitor everything you do on it. The same science that developed modern agriculture feeds billions with food so processed and sprayed that rates of cancer, diabetes and autoimmune disease are higher than at any point in human history.

Science itself isn't the problem. Science is a method, you observe something, you come up with an explanation, you test it, you learn from the results. It's the most honest system humans have ever devised for understanding the world. The problem, as with everything

else in this book, is what the institutions do with it. Gunpowder was invented in China for fireworks and became the foundation of modern warfare. Nuclear fission was theoretically beautiful and became the most destructive weapon ever created. The internet was designed by academics to share research and became the most sophisticated advertising and surveillance machine in existence. The discovery is pure, the application is corrupted by whoever controls it.

And the people who made the discoveries? Galileo proved the earth orbits the sun and was placed under house arrest by the Catholic Church for the rest of his life. Ignaz Semmelweis figured out in the 1840s that doctors were killing patients by not washing their hands between performing autopsies and delivering babies, and his colleagues rejected him so aggressively he had a breakdown and died in an asylum at 47. Alan Turing cracked the Enigma code, the encryption system the Nazis used to communicate secretly, shortened the war by an estimated 2 years, laid the foundations of modern computing, and was prosecuted for being gay, chemically castrated and died at 41. The institution captures the discovery and punishes the discoverer if they threaten the existing order. Same pattern, different century.

Now for the weird stuff.

Everything you can see and touch is made of atoms, the smallest unit of any element. If you could zoom into a glass of water far beyond what any microscope can see, you'd eventually reach individual atoms. Atoms are made of even smaller parts: protons and neutrons clustered together in the centre, and electrons orbiting around the outside. For a long time scientists thought these behaved like tiny solid balls moving in predictable paths. Then in the early 1900s physicists started looking closer and found that at this incredibly small scale, the rules we take for granted simply stop working.

In the world you and I live in, a thing is either here or there. A ball is in your left hand or your right hand, not both. At the quantum level, a particle can exist in multiple states at the same time, a condition called superposition. Think of a coin spinning in the air, it's neither heads nor tails until it lands. A quantum particle is like that except it isn't just that we don't know which state it's in, it genuinely hasn't settled into one yet. It only becomes definite when someone observes it. The act of looking at it determines what it becomes.

Then there's entanglement. When 2 particles interact in a certain way they become linked. Not by a wire or a signal or any physical connection, linked in a way that has no explanation in the physics of our everyday world. You can separate them by any distance, put one on earth and one on the other side of the galaxy, and when you measure one the other responds instantly. Not at the speed of light, which at roughly 186,000 miles per second is supposed to be the fastest anything can travel. Instantly, no delay, regardless of distance. Einstein called it "spooky action at a distance" because he was convinced it must be wrong. It isn't. In 2022, 3 physicists won the Nobel Prize for proving it conclusively. In 2024, researchers achieved quantum teleportation, the transfer of quantum data from one location to another without it physically travelling between the two, over ordinary internet cables. In 2025 a team at Stanford built a device that entangles light and electrons at room temperature, something previously only possible near absolute zero, roughly minus 459 degrees Fahrenheit, the coldest anything can theoretically get.

Nobody fully understands why it works. It breaks the idea that information needs time to travel and suggests that at the deepest level, things that appear separate might not be.

Then there's the double-slit experiment. You fire electrons one at a time at a barrier with 2 narrow slits in it. Behind the barrier is a screen that records where each one lands. If electrons were tiny balls you'd expect 2 clusters of hits behind the 2 gaps, like lobbing tennis balls through a fence. Instead they create an interference pattern, a series of bands spread across the screen that only makes sense if each electron is behaving like a wave, passing through both slits simultaneously and overlapping with itself on the other side. One particle, 2 gaps, at the same time.

Now put a detector at the slits to watch which gap the electron goes through. The interference pattern vanishes. It behaves like a ball again, picking one slit. Remove the detector and the wave pattern returns. The electron behaves differently depending on whether anyone is watching.

There are interpretations. The Copenhagen interpretation, developed by the physicist Niels Bohr, says the mathematical description of all the particle's possible states collapses into a single state when observed. The many-worlds interpretation says every possibility branches into a separate universe. But no one actually knows. The most successful theory in the history of science, the one that makes your phone and your microwave and your MRI scanner work, and its own creators couldn't explain what it means.

Quantum computing is built on these principles. A normal computer processes information in bits, each one either a 0 or a 1, like a switch that's on or off. Everything it does is built from long strings of 0s and 1s calculated one at a time. A quantum computer uses qubits, quantum bits, and because of superposition a qubit can be 0, 1 or both simultaneously. This means it can process enormous numbers of calculations at the same time rather than in sequence. In 2019 Google demonstrated that its quantum processor solved a specific problem in 200 seconds that would take the world's best classical supercomputer roughly 10,000 years.

The implications go far beyond speed. Encryption, the system that protects your bank details, your medical records, military communications, government secrets, all of it, is built on mathematical problems that classical computers can't solve in any reasonable timeframe. That's what keeps it secure. A sufficiently powerful quantum computer could crack those problems. A Google researcher published a study suggesting that RSA-2048, one of the most widely used encryption standards, could be broken in under a week with a quantum machine of fewer than a million qubits. Current machines have dozens to hundreds, but the race is on and every major government and tech company on earth is trying to get there first.

In 2025, which UNESCO declared the International Year of Quantum Science and Technology, the Nobel Prize in Physics went to John Clarke, Michel Devoret and John Martinis for proving that quantum effects like tunnelling, where a particle passes through a barrier it shouldn't be able to get through, like a ball rolling straight through a solid wall, can occur at scales visible to the human eye, not just at the subatomic level. That blurred the line between the quantum world and the one we think we live in. Stanford researchers built miniature light traps that could eventually scale quantum computers to a million qubits. Microsoft announced a breakthrough in Majorana qubits, a type that stores information in a

way that resists the interference which has been quantum computing's biggest obstacle, because qubits are incredibly fragile and lose their state at the slightest disturbance. A new state of matter called a quantum liquid crystal was discovered at the boundary between 2 exotic materials, behaving unlike anything observed before. And physicists found hidden geometry inside materials that bends electrons the way gravity bends light in space.

I don't pretend to understand all of this. But I understand enough to know that the most rigorous, evidence-based, peer-reviewed discipline humans have ever created has spent a century studying the smallest components of reality and arrived at conclusions that sound, to a non-scientist, completely insane. Things exist in 2 states at once until someone looks at them. Particles separated by any distance remain instantly connected. The solid world we think we're living in is, at its foundation, a cloud of probabilities that only becomes definite when someone pays attention.

I don't know what that means. The physicists don't either, and the honest ones will tell you so. But if reality at its most fundamental level is not what we were told it is, then what else have we been wrong about? That question has been running through every chapter of this book. And we're about to find out that science isn't the only place it leads.

China

I can't talk about every country. There's just too much to say, and I think most of us are becoming aware in some form of what many states and regimes have done over the last 100 years and beyond. Britain has its empire to answer for, America has its wars and its coups, Russia has its gulags, pogroms and its invasions, Belgium has the Congo, France has Algeria, Japan has the territory I'm about to come to, and the list goes on Israel, Germany, Portugal, South Africa, Australia, Cambodia there is virtually none that could be excluded.

Every major power has skeletons, and a book that tried to catalogue all of them would be 10 times the length of this one and still wouldn't do the job. So I'm going to focus on one country, because the next chapter is about something I can't write without first explaining where it comes from. And I'll try to stay on point as much as I can.

I'm going to talk about China. The good and the bad. Because the story of China over the last 200 years contains every single theme this book has been looking at. Empire and exploitation, capture and recovery, growth and contradiction, and at the end of it, the reason why the t-shirt in your wardrobe costs £4. You cannot honestly talk about modern consumerism without talking about China, and you cannot honestly talk about China without first acknowledging what was done to it before you start judging what it does now.

This is the part where I lose half of my readers, because as soon as I say anything balanced about China the assumption is going to be that I'm a defender of the Chinese Communist Party. I'm not. By the end of this chapter you'll see exactly what I think about what the Chinese state is currently doing to a particular minority within its borders, and it's not gentle. But I'm not interested in writing a hit piece either. I'm interested in the truth, and the truth, as always, is more complicated than the headline.

Let's start with what most British schoolchildren are not taught.

In the early 1800s, Britain had a problem. The British public had become utterly addicted to tea. Tea was the national drink, every working family had it on the table 3 times a day, and almost all of it came from China. The trouble was that the Chinese didn't really want anything Britain was selling in return. They had their own porcelain, their own silk, their own everything. They weren't interested in British manufactured goods. So Britain was paying for Chinese tea in silver, and the silver was haemorrhaging out of the British treasury at a rate that was starting to threaten the entire economy.

The East India Company, which was effectively the corporate arm of the British Empire, found a solution. They started growing opium on enormous plantations in their Indian colonies, processing it into a smokable drug, and shipping it into China in vast quantities. By the 1830s Britain was selling roughly 1,400 tonnes of opium a year into China. Opium is one of the most addictive substances ever discovered. By 1840, by Britain's own estimates, there were millions of opium addicts across China. Entire communities were being destroyed. Family savings were being spent on the drug. Workers were turning up to fields and workshops too stoned to function. The Chinese economy was being hollowed out from the inside. And the silver that had previously been flowing from Britain to China was now flowing the other way, back into British and East India Company coffers, in payment for the drug.

The Chinese government did what any government on earth would do. It tried to stop the trade. The opium was illegal in China, just as it had been illegal under earlier dynasties for the same reason. In 1839 the Chinese emperor appointed a senior official called Lin Zexu to enforce the ban. Lin wrote a famous open letter to Queen Victoria appealing to her conscience. He pointed out that opium was banned in Britain itself, and asked how a country that protected its own citizens from a drug could justify making its merchants rich by forcing that drug on someone else's people. The letter never reached the queen. And even if it had, it wouldn't have mattered. Lin then seized roughly 1,000 tonnes of British-owned opium in the port of Canton and destroyed it in public, mixing it with lime and salt and washing it out to sea.

Britain's response was to declare war.

Read that again. Britain declared war on China because China tried to stop Britain from selling drugs to its people.

The First Opium War lasted from 1839 to 1842. The Royal Navy, with its modern warships and modern guns, against a Chinese military that was still using equipment from 2 centuries earlier. It was a slaughter. The British sailed up the coast picking off Chinese forts at will. Eventually they took Nanking, then the second city of the Qing empire, and forced the Chinese to sign what became known as the Treaty of Nanking. It was the first of what the Chinese now call the unequal treaties. Under it, China had to pay 21 million silver dollars to compensate British merchants for the opium that had been destroyed and to cover the cost of the war Britain had launched against them. Five Chinese ports were forced open to British trade. And Britain took permanent possession of Hong Kong island, which it would hold for 155 years.

The opium trade was not yet legal. So in 1856, Britain found another excuse and started a second war, this time joined by France. The Second Opium War lasted from 1856 to 1860. It ended with British and French troops marching into Beijing, looting the Old Summer Palace, the imperial residence which had been one of the greatest collections of art and architecture in the world, and then setting it on fire. The flames burned for 3 days. Many of the looted treasures still sit in European museums and private collections today. The Chinese have been asking for them back for over 160 years. They are still waiting.

The Treaty of Tianjin that ended the second war fully legalised opium in China, opened 10 more ports to foreign trade, gave foreigners freedom to travel anywhere inside the country, and granted Christian missionaries the right to spread their religion across Chinese soil. The British took the southern Kowloon peninsula on top of Hong Kong island. France, Russia, the United States and Germany piled in for their own concessions, all under the most favoured nation clause that meant whatever any one foreign power got from China, all the others got too. China lost control of its own coast, its own customs, its own legal system over foreigners on its own territory, and its own ability to refuse a drug being shoved into the throats of its own people.

That period, from roughly 1839 to 1949, is what every Chinese schoolchild today learns about as the Century of Humiliation. It's not propaganda. It happened. And it didn't just happen at the hands of Britain. Over those 110 years, China was carved up by Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Japan, the United States, and Portugal, in different ways and to different extents. Foreign powers had spheres of influence inside Chinese territory. Foreign warships patrolled Chinese rivers. Foreign citizens in China were exempt from Chinese law under what was called extraterritoriality, meaning if a British sailor murdered a Chinese villager, he was tried by a British court inside China rather than by the Chinese authorities. The Chinese were treated as a subject people inside their own country. Signs in Western-controlled parts of Shanghai famously read "no dogs and no Chinese."

In 1900, after a Chinese uprising called the Boxer Rebellion tried to expel the foreign powers, an Eight-Nation Alliance of Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Japan, the United States, Italy and Austria-Hungary invaded China together, defeated the imperial army, occupied Beijing, and forced the Chinese government to pay another massive indemnity that crippled the economy for a generation. The international force then spent weeks looting and burning Chinese towns on its way back to the coast.

This is the history that almost no one in Britain learns. We were taught about the British Empire as if it was mostly a story of building railways and abolishing slavery. The Opium Wars are barely mentioned in most schools, and when they are mentioned, the framing is something like "Britain fought a war in China over trade." That's like describing the conquest of the Americas as "Spain visited the New World." The truth is that Britain was, for the better

part of a century, the world's largest drug cartel, and we used the Royal Navy to enforce our right to be one. If the situation were reversed, if China today were forcing fentanyl into British schools at gunpoint, we would call it an act of war and a crime against humanity. We would be right. But that is what we did to them.

I'm not telling you this so you'll feel guilty about being British. You and I personally did none of it. I'm telling you this because if you don't understand what was done to China for 110 years, you can't understand why the Chinese state today behaves the way it does, why the Chinese Communist Party still has popular support even among Chinese people who know its faults, and why China is so suspicious of any Western criticism of its internal affairs. The Century of Humiliation isn't ancient history to them. It's the founding wound of the modern Chinese state, and every Chinese leader since Mao has built their legitimacy on the promise that it will never happen again.

And then it got worse, because then came Japan.

In the 1930s, Imperial Japan had decided that it was going to build an empire of its own across East Asia. China was its first target. Japan invaded the northeastern Chinese region of Manchuria in 1931 and turned it into a puppet state. In July 1937, after a clash at the Marco Polo Bridge near Beijing, Japan launched a full-scale invasion of the rest of China. The Second Sino-Japanese War had begun. It would not end until Japan's surrender in 1945, 8 years later. The total Chinese death toll across that war is estimated at somewhere between 15 and 20 million people, the majority of them civilians.

In December 1937, after a brutal battle in Shanghai, the Japanese army marched on Nanking, then the capital of China. The Chinese government had already fled. The city was largely defenceless. What happened next is one of the most horrific atrocities of the entire 20th century.

Over a period of roughly 6 weeks, Japanese soldiers methodically and systematically murdered, raped and tortured the civilian population of the city. The estimates of how many people died vary depending on the source. Japanese revisionists put the number as low as a few thousand. The most rigorous academic estimates put it at well over 100,000 and possibly closer to 200,000. The Chinese government's official figure is 300,000. The number of women and girls raped is estimated at between 20,000 and 80,000, with many of them mutilated and killed afterwards. Babies were bayoneted. Elderly men were beheaded. There

were killing contests held by Japanese officers, recorded in their own diaries, soldiers competed to see who could behead the most prisoners with a sword. Pregnant women had their bellies cut open. Entire families were burned alive in their houses. Roughly a third of the city was deliberately set on fire and destroyed.

A small group of Western businessmen and missionaries, led by a German Nazi Party member called John Rabe, set up what they called the Nanking Safety Zone in part of the city and used their foreign passports to shelter as many Chinese civilians as they could. It is estimated they saved around 200,000 lives. Rabe himself wrote in his diary about what he was witnessing, and later wrote letters to Hitler personally appealing for the German government to intervene and stop the atrocities. Hitler, who was an ally of Japan, did nothing.

I want you to sit with that for a second. The thing that was happening in Nanking was so bad that an actual member of the Nazi Party was begging Hitler to intervene on humanitarian grounds. That is how bad it was.

Most British people have never heard of Nanking. Every schoolchild in China knows about it. Every schoolchild in China is taught about it the way every schoolchild in Britain is taught about the Holocaust. It is an active, present, raw wound in the relationship between China and Japan to this day, almost 90 years later. Japan has, depending on which government and which year, alternately apologised, half-apologised, denied parts of it, and removed mentions of it from school textbooks. There are still active political disputes between China and Japan about how Nanking should be remembered. The wound has not healed.

When the war finally ended in 1945 with Japan's surrender, China had been devastated. Tens of millions dead, much of the country in ruins, the economy destroyed, and 110 years of foreign domination still fresh in living memory. What came next was the Chinese Civil War between the Communists under Mao Zedong and the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek. The Communists won. On the 1st of October 1949, Mao stood in Tiananmen Square in Beijing and declared the founding of the People's Republic of China. His most famous line from that speech is one every Chinese person knows. "The Chinese people have stood up."

That's the line that explains everything that came after. Because for the previous 110 years, in the eyes of every Chinese person alive, they hadn't been allowed to stand up. They had been pushed around, drugged, invaded, humiliated, raped and murdered by foreign powers in their own country. Whatever else you think about Mao, and there is a lot to think about, the moment in which he stood in that square and said those words was a moment of genuine

national release. It was the end of the Century of Humiliation. It was the moment China became its own country again.

Now here's where I have to be honest about the other side of the story, because this isn't a defence of the Chinese Communist Party either.

Mao's rule, from 1949 to 1976, was a catastrophe in many ways. The Great Leap Forward, his attempt to industrialise China overnight by forcing peasants off their farms and into communal steel-making and grain-collectivisation projects between 1958 and 1962, caused one of the worst famines in human history. The estimates of how many died range from 15 million at the lowest end to 55 million at the highest, with most academic studies converging on a figure somewhere around 30 to 40 million people. To put that in perspective, that's the entire population of Canada starving to death because of one man's economic experiment. Then came the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, in which Mao unleashed a generation of teenage Red Guards on Chinese society to destroy what he called the "four olds" - old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas. Universities were closed for years. Teachers, intellectuals and writers were beaten in the streets, paraded through their towns wearing dunce hats, sent to labour camps in the countryside, or driven to suicide. Ancient temples and historical sites were smashed. Books were burned. Families were torn apart, with children encouraged to denounce their parents to the authorities. The estimates of how many died directly from violence during the Cultural Revolution range from around 500,000 to several million, with vastly more lives ruined.

This is the corruption cycle this whole book has been describing, in its rawest possible form. The signal of the Communist revolution had been about lifting ordinary people out of foreign domination and poverty. Within 10 years it had been captured and corrupted into something that was killing tens of millions of those same ordinary people in the name of the same ideology. Mao himself, in his final years, became something close to a god-emperor, with his face on every wall and his Little Red Book of quotations carried like scripture. The institution had eaten its own original purpose, exactly the way every institution this book has examined has done. Mao died in 1976. The country he left behind was exhausted, traumatised and still desperately poor.

And then came the most extraordinary economic transformation in recorded human history.

In 1978, 2 years after Mao's death, the new leader Deng Xiaoping made a famous speech in which he said "poverty is not socialism. Socialism means eliminating poverty." Deng was a survivor of the Cultural Revolution. He had been purged, sent to work in a tractor factory for years, and brought back. He had no romantic illusions about ideology. He had a single, stubborn idea, which was that the actual job of government was to make ordinary people's lives better, and that whatever worked was acceptable. He famously said it didn't matter whether a cat was black or white, as long as it caught mice.

Starting in 1978 and continuing through the 1980s and 1990s, Deng and his successors gradually opened up the Chinese economy. They allowed farmers to keep what they grew above their state quotas and sell it on the open market. They let small private businesses operate again. They created Special Economic Zones along the coast where foreign companies could come in and set up factories. They invested massively in roads, railways, ports, electricity and education. They encouraged hundreds of millions of rural Chinese to move to cities and work in the new factories. They sent their best students abroad to learn, with the explicit expectation that they would come home and apply what they had learned. They didn't democratise. They kept the political system tightly controlled by the Communist Party. But they opened up the economy in a way that was unprecedented in scale and speed.

What happened next is, in pure numerical terms, the largest reduction in human poverty ever recorded. According to the World Bank, in 1981 around 88% of the Chinese population were living in extreme poverty as defined by the international standard of $1.90 per day. By 2015 that figure was 0.7%. Almost 800 million people, in a single human lifetime, were lifted out of extreme poverty. That accounts for more than 75% of all global poverty reduction over the same period. China's share of the world economy went from 1.5% in 1978 to over 15% by the late 2010s. Per capita income increased roughly 25 fold, from around $300 a year in 1978 to over $7,300 a year by 2017, and has continued rising since.

I know there are honest debates about how to measure this. Some economists argue that the World Bank's figures are too optimistic. Others argue that a lot of the improvement was simply undoing the damage Mao had caused. Both points have some truth to them. But even allowing for every reasonable caveat, what happened in China from 1978 onwards is something the world has never seen before. Cities of 20 million people were built from rice fields in 30 years. High speed rail networks were laid across the country that put British and American infrastructure to shame. A country that in 1978 had almost no private cars now has hundreds of millions. A country that 50 years ago was largely rural and illiterate now has more graduates than any country on earth, more patents filed per year than any country on earth, and more internet users than any country on earth. The change in lived experience for an ordinary Chinese person between, say, the 1960s and today is more dramatic than the change in lived experience for an ordinary British person between the year 1500 and today.

I'm telling you this not because I think the Chinese system is some sort of model to copy. It isn't, and I'll come to why in a moment. I'm telling you this because if a chapter about China only listed the bad things, it would be lying by omission. The same country that put 1 million people in the camps I'm about to describe also lifted 800 million people out of starvation. Both things are true at the same time. Pretending otherwise turns this into a propaganda exercise, and propaganda is exactly what this book has been written against.

But here is where it turns. Because the same system that achieved the economic miracle has also done some of the worst things any government on earth is currently doing to its own people. And the longer the system stayed in power, the more it consolidated, the more it surveilled, the more it crushed any threat to its monopoly on power.

In 1989, students and workers gathered in Tiananmen Square in Beijing for weeks of peaceful protest, calling for democratic reforms, freedom of the press and an end to corruption. The protests spread to dozens of other Chinese cities. The Communist Party leadership was split on how to respond. Eventually, on the night of the 3rd to 4th of June, the People's Liberation Army was sent in with tanks. Soldiers opened fire on the crowds. The estimates of how many died range from a few hundred to several thousand, depending on whose figures you trust. The most credible recent estimate, from a leaked British diplomatic cable, puts the figure at around 10,000 killed. The most famous image of the entire event is a single unknown man in a white shirt standing alone in front of a column of tanks, refusing to move. We don't know what happened to him. He was almost certainly killed.

Today, inside China, the Tiananmen Square massacre has been almost completely scrubbed from public memory. If you search for it on the Chinese internet, you get nothing. Young Chinese people often genuinely don't know it happened. The date June 4th is censored. The famous Tank Man image is blocked. An entire generation has been raised to believe that something either didn't happen, or was a minor disturbance that the government bravely put down to preserve stability. The institution rewrote its own history because it could.

Hong Kong, which had been handed back from Britain to China in 1997 under an agreement called "one country, two systems" that was supposed to preserve its democratic rights for 50 years, started losing those rights from 2014 onwards. After massive pro-democracy protests in 2019 and 2020, Beijing imposed a National Security Law in 2020 that effectively criminalised dissent. Pro-democracy activists were arrested, newspapers were shut down, opposition politicians were jailed or driven into exile. The 50 year promise was broken in less than 25.

Tibet has been under Chinese control since 1950, with periodic uprisings and ongoing suppression of Tibetan Buddhism, the Tibetan language and the influence of the Dalai Lama, who fled into exile in India in 1959 and has lived there ever since.

There is mass surveillance of the Chinese population at a scale that makes the worst fears of the Western dystopian novelists look quaint. Hundreds of millions of cameras with facial recognition. A social credit system in some regions that tracks individual behaviour and assigns scores affecting people's ability to travel, get loans or send their children to certain schools. Internet controls so comprehensive that an entire generation has grown up unable to access Google, Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia, the BBC or basically any independent foreign news source.

And then there is what is happening to the Uyghurs.

In the far northwest of China, in a region the Uyghurs call East Turkestan and the Chinese government calls Xinjiang, which is a Mandarin word that literally means "new frontier" or "new territory," there are about 12 million Uyghurs. They are a Turkic people. That means ethnically and linguistically they are far closer to Turks, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Turkmen than they are to Han Chinese. They speak Uyghur, which is in the same language family as the languages of Central Asia, not in the family of Mandarin or Cantonese. They look different from Han Chinese, they dress differently, they eat differently, they sing differently, they dance differently, they marry differently. They are, in every meaningful sense, a separate civilisation that happens to live within the borders of modern China.

The very name Xinjiang is an admission. You don't call a place "the new bit" if it's been part of you forever. China formally annexed the region in 1759 under the Qing dynasty, and even after that, governed it as a separate territory for over a century before fully incorporating it. The Uyghurs and their ancestors have lived in the oases of the Tarim Basin and along the foothills of the Tien Shan mountains for at least 1,300 years, and almost certainly far longer. When you stand in the old city of Kashgar, you are standing in a place that was a major hub of human civilisation when London was a swamp.

The Uyghurs are predominantly Muslims today, and have been for several centuries. But Islam is not their original religion, and their religious history is one of the most varied of any people on earth. Long before they were Muslims, the population of this region practised Buddhism, and the area was a major centre of Buddhist civilisation for around a thousand

years. The cave temples at Bezeklik and Kizil contain some of the most important Buddhist art anywhere in the world. They also practised Zoroastrianism, the ancient Persian faith, which spread along the Silk Road trading routes that ran through their oases. For about 200 years, between roughly 762 and 840 CE, the Uyghur Khaganate, their original kingdom, made Manichaeism its official state religion. Manichaeism was a syncretic faith founded by the Persian prophet Mani in the 3rd century, blending ideas from Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Buddhism and gnostic traditions. The Uyghur Khaganate is the only state in human history to have ever officially adopted it. Then there was Nestorian Christianity, which was widespread among the Uyghurs' ancestors in the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries. By the year 1009, around 200,000 of them had been baptised as Christians. Then in the 14th century, Christianity disappeared from the population almost completely, and the Uyghurs converted to Islam, which is where they have stayed for the last 600 years.

Buddhism. Zoroastrianism. Manichaeism. Nestorian Christianity. Islam. Five major religions, across roughly 1,500 years, all carried by the same people in the same place. The wrapping kept changing but the people kept being decent farmers, traders, poets, musicians, weavers and craftspeople, getting on with the same lives their grandparents had. The form of Islam they ended up with is moderate, deeply cultural, rich with music and poetry and Sufi mysticism, blended with the older traditions that came before it. Women generally don't cover their faces. Men don't typically have huge beards. There's singing and dancing at weddings. There are saints and shrines that people visit. It's a relaxed, lived, gentle faith that is woven into Uyghur identity rather than imposed on top of it.

There has been Uyghur violence. It's not a Chinese fabrication. Between roughly 1990 and 2016, a small number of Uyghurs carried out attacks against Chinese civilians. The worst of them was in March 2014, when 8 attackers walked into Kunming railway station, hundreds of miles from Xinjiang, dressed in black, armed with knives and cleavers, and started slashing at random commuters. They killed 31 people and injured 143. In April that year, attackers detonated bombs at Urumqi railway station, killing 3 and injuring 79. In May, 5 men drove SUVs into a market in Urumqi throwing explosives out the windows, killing 43 people including 4 of the attackers. In October 2013, a vehicle was driven into Tiananmen Square in Beijing and set on fire, killing 2 bystanders. There were other incidents going back to a bus bombing in Urumqi in 1992. The total death toll from all Uyghur attacks combined, over roughly 25 years, runs into the hundreds of civilians killed.

These were real attacks against real people who had done nothing wrong. Any honest book has to say so. If your child or your mum had been on that train platform in Kunming, you would not care about the historical context. You would just want the people responsible found and punished. That has to be acknowledged.

But the question this chapter is asking is what those attackers said they were doing it for, because the answer matters. And when you actually read the academic studies, the testimonies, the statements from Uyghur exile groups, and even what was found at the scene of the attacks, the reasons given are almost never about religious extremism in any meaningful sense. They're about something else entirely.

The attackers in Kunming, according to investigators, came from a town in Hotan in southern Xinjiang where in June 2013 the police had violently suppressed a peaceful demonstration against the closure of a mosque and the arrest of its imam. 15 Uyghurs were killed at that demonstration and 50 more were injured. 8 months later, some of the people from that town walked into a railway station with knives. That's not a justification. But it is a chain of events.

The deeper grievances, the ones that come up over and over in interviews with Uyghurs and in academic research, are these.

First, the demographic transformation of their homeland. In 1949 Xinjiang was around 75% Uyghur and 6% Han Chinese. By 2010 it was roughly 46% Uyghur and 40% Han Chinese. That wasn't an accident. The Chinese state actively encouraged Han Chinese migration into Xinjiang for 60 years through tax breaks, job offers and a paramilitary corporation called the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps which built entire Han-only cities on what had been Uyghur land. The Uyghurs watched their homeland being demographically replaced inside a single lifetime.

Second, economic exclusion. Xinjiang sits on enormous reserves of cotton, oil, natural gas, coal and rare earth minerals. The profits from those resources flow to Beijing and to Han Chinese owned companies. Job advertisements in Xinjiang historically excluded Uyghurs explicitly, with phrases like "Mandarin speakers only" or "Han preferred." Uyghurs in their own homeland found themselves locked out of the best jobs in industries built on their own land's wealth.

Third, the suppression of their language and culture. By 2017 the Uyghur language had been formally banned as a language of instruction in Xinjiang schools. Uyghur poets, historians and writers were being arrested and given long prison sentences for "inciting separatism" if they tried to preserve their cultural heritage. The novelist Nurmemet Yasin got 10 years in prison in 2005 for writing an allegorical short story about a blue pigeon that the authorities decided was secretly about Uyghur freedom. Hundreds of Uyghur intellectuals and cultural figures have been disappeared.

Fourth, the religious restrictions. Long before any of the attacks, the Chinese state was already cutting back Uyghur religious practice. By 1966 it had reduced the number of mosques in Xinjiang from 29,000 to 14,000. Children under 18 were banned from entering mosques. Government employees were forbidden from fasting during Ramadan. Beards were restricted. Headscarves were banned. Praying in public could get you arrested.

Fifth, and this is the one that scholars keep coming back to, the complete absence of any peaceful political voice. There was no legitimate, recognised channel through which Uyghur grievances could be heard inside China. The World Uyghur Congress, which is a non-violent advocacy group based in Germany, is banned in China and labelled a terrorist organisation. Anyone who spoke out publicly was arrested. Any peaceful demonstration was met with force. Professor Willy Lam at the Chinese University of Hong Kong put it plainly. The absence of any mechanism for airing grievances is what pushed a small minority of desperate young men towards violence. This isn't unique to Xinjiang. It's the same pattern that has played out everywhere in human history where one group is systematically denied a voice. Northern Ireland. South Africa. Palestine. Kosovo. When peaceful avenues close, some people pick up weapons. It is never a justification. It is always a pattern.

The Chinese state's response was to do what it had been planning to do anyway, which was to attempt to assimilate, dilute and ultimately erase an entire people whose culture had survived in that place for 1,500 years. The attacks gave it political cover.

Since around 2014, but escalating dramatically from 2017 onwards, the Chinese government has been putting Uyghurs in camps. The official name for the camps is "vocational education and training centres." The official purpose is "de-extremification." The actual function, according to leaked Chinese government documents, satellite imagery, testimony from hundreds of former detainees, and investigations by the UN, the International Labour Organization, the US State Department, the Canadian parliament, the Dutch parliament and multiple academic institutions, is mass internment, indoctrination, forced sterilisation, cultural erasure and forced labour.

Estimates of how many people have been through these camps range from 1 million to over 1.8 million. The UN has described what's happening as potentially amounting to crimes against humanity. The United States, Canada and the Netherlands have formally recognised it as genocide. The Chinese government calls it poverty alleviation.

Here's what the poverty alleviation looks like in practice. Uyghurs are rounded up, sometimes for offences as minor as praying, wearing traditional clothing, or having relatives living abroad. They're held in the camps, forced to learn Mandarin, forced to renounce Islam, forced to sing praises to the Communist Party. When they're released, many are transferred directly into factory work under what the Chinese government calls "labour transfer programmes." Some are sent to factories inside Xinjiang. Others are shipped thousands of miles to factories in other provinces, where they live in guarded dormitories, work 12 hour shifts, have their wages withheld, and are forbidden from practising their religion. They can't leave. They can't go home. If their families want to see them, they have to apply to the state for permission.

Since 2017, around 16,000 mosques in Xinjiang have been demolished or damaged, which is roughly 65% of the region's total. Uyghur language instruction has been banned in schools. The Uyghur birth rate has plummeted, with reports of forced sterilisations and forced contraception. Hundreds of thousands of Uyghur children have been placed in state-run boarding schools and separated from their families. Between 2009 and 2023, the Chinese government changed over 600 Uyghur village names that held historical, religious or cultural value, replacing them with neutral Chinese names.

The crackdown intensified massively from 2017 onwards. The last significant attack in Xinjiang was in December 2016. So the period of mass internment camps, the demolition of 16,000 mosques, the language ban, the forced sterilisations, the family separations and the forced labour transfers all happened during years when there was no terrorism to respond to. The "anti-terrorism" framing was the public justification. But the timing proves the project was always about something else. It was always about completing the long project of cultural assimilation that some scholars and the US, Canadian and Dutch parliaments now formally describe as genocide. The terrorism just gave it political cover.

A few hundred civilians were killed by Uyghur attackers over 25 years. That is awful. The IRA killed more in a single decade in Northern Ireland and the British response, while heavy-handed and very often unjust, was nothing remotely like what is happening in Xinjiang. A normal country handles a few hundred deaths through criminal justice, intelligence work and addressing the grievances that drove the violence. China decided to put 1 to 1.8 million people in camps.

You do not put a million people in camps because of a few dozen attackers. You put a million people in camps when you've decided that the people themselves are the problem. The terrorism framing was a story the institution told the world to buy time while it did what it had been planning to do all along.

So this is the country I'm trying to describe in a single chapter. A country that was savaged by Britain and France and Japan for over a century, and rightly resents it. A country that fed its own people through Maoist madness that killed tens of millions of them. A country that then performed the largest and fastest poverty reduction in recorded human history, lifting 800 million human beings out of starvation in 40 years. A country that has built infrastructure and cities and technology at a scale and pace that the West can only watch with a mixture of envy and unease. And a country whose government, having achieved all of that, is currently doing things to its own minorities that the international community has formally described as genocide.

Both of those things are true at the same time. China is not the cartoon villain that some Western coverage makes it out to be, and it is not the heroic developing nation standing up to Western imperialism that Chinese state media presents either. It is a real place with real history, real achievements, real crimes, and 1.4 billion real people just trying to get on with their lives, most of whom love their country, are proud of what it has built, and have very little say in what their government does in their name. Just like you and me.

The corruption cycle this book has been describing runs through every chapter of China's modern history. The signal of national independence got captured by Mao's personality cult and turned into mass starvation. The signal of economic reform under Deng got captured by the Communist Party's monopoly on power and turned into a surveillance state. The signal of bringing the Uyghurs into the modern Chinese economy got captured into forced labour camps. Each time, something that started with a real and arguably good intention was eaten by the institution that was supposed to deliver it.

And now we come to where this chapter has been heading from the start. Because the same country that built itself up through 40 years of frantic manufacturing, the country that became the workshop of the world, the country whose factories make a huge proportion of everything you and I own, including the t-shirt I'm wearing as I write this, is the same country that is currently using forced Uyghur labour to pick its cotton, weave its fabric, and sew its clothes. And those clothes are then being shipped to a website on your phone, where you scroll through them in bed, see the £4 price tag, and click buy.

Consumerism

Buckle up, please. Because this one is about to get uncomfortable. This book so far has pointed outward. The banks did this, the government did that, the media lied, the pharmaceutical industry captured the regulator, the energy companies buried the science, All of it is true. But it's also easy. It's easy to blame institutions and forces that feel far away from your daily life, because it lets you sit back and shake your head and say look at what they're doing to us.This chapter is different. This one is about us. This one is about me. This one is about the fact that while I've been writing a book about institutional corruption, I've been clicking "buy now" on websites that are among the worst institutional actors operating in the world today. This is the chapter where I stop being an innocent bystander and have to admit I'm part of the problem.

Let's start with where your clothes come from.

Xinjiang produces around 85% of China's cotton and at least 20% of the world's cotton. Around 1 in every 5 cotton garments sold on the global market contains cotton that was grown, picked or processed in Xinjiang. That's a US government estimate, not an activist figure. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute identified 83 major international brands benefiting directly or indirectly from Uyghur forced labour. The UN International Labour Organization in 2024 alleged "widespread and state-sponsored forced labour practices" across both Xinjiang and Tibet. The US passed the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act in 2021, which legally presumes that any product made in whole or in part in Xinjiang is the product of forced labour unless the importer can prove otherwise. The UK hasn't passed anything comparable.

So when I'm telling you that the clothes on your back, the clothes on my back, the clothes I ordered last month from an ad I saw on Instagram, are almost certainly linked in some way to people being held against their will in camps in northwest China, I'm not exaggerating and I'm not being dramatic. I'm telling you what multiple governments, UN bodies, academic institutions and investigative journalists have now documented beyond any reasonable doubt. The worst offenders, and the ones I'm most embarrassed to say I've bought from, are Shein and Temu.

Shein is a Chinese fast fashion company now headquartered in Singapore for tax reasons. Temu is owned by PDD Holdings, a Chinese e-commerce giant. Between them, in 2021, they accounted for nearly half of all de minimis shipments into the United States, which is the customs loophole that lets packages worth under $800 enter the country without inspection or import duty. They do the same thing in the UK and Europe. In 2024 around 4 billion low value packages entered the EU, 91% of them from China. They aren't just selling you cheap stuff. They're specifically designed to bypass every border inspection and every supply chain check that exists, by sending their products directly to your door in small parcels, individually, so nobody ever gets the chance to look inside a shipping container.

In 2022, Bloomberg News commissioned independent laboratory testing on garments that Shein had shipped to the United States. On two separate occasions, the tests came back showing that the cotton in the clothes came from Xinjiang. That's not an allegation, that's a lab result.

In 2024, the US Congressional Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, which is bipartisan, published interim findings from its investigation into Shein and Temu. One of the key findings was that Temu, in writing, admitted to the committee that it "does not expressly prohibit third-party sellers from selling products based on their origin in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region." Temu also admitted that it conducts no audits and operates no compliance system to determine whether the products it sells are made with forced labour. Its code of conduct theoretically prohibits forced labour but there is no mechanism to enforce it. The committee concluded that there is an "extremely high risk" that Temu's supply chains are contaminated with forced labour. In January 2025, executives from Shein and Temu were summoned before the UK Parliament's Business and Trade Committee. Shein's general counsel, Yinan Zhu, was asked repeatedly whether cotton from Xinjiang was present in Shein's supply chains. She refused to answer. She refused to say whether the company's code of conduct prohibited Xinjiang cotton. She refused to comment on whether there was forced labour in Xinjiang at all, saying it wasn't Shein's place to "have a geopolitical debate." The committee chair, Liam Byrne, said afterwards that the committee was "horrified" by her testimony and that her refusal to answer basic questions "bordered on contempt." This is Shein a few months before it was preparing to list on the London Stock Exchange with a valuation of around £50 billion.

Then in January 2025 the BBC published an investigation based on several days inside the "Shein village" in Panyu, Guangzhou. They spoke to workers and factory owners. They found workers doing 75 hour weeks, in direct contravention of Chinese labour laws. One worker told them "if there are 31 days in a month, I will work 31 days." They found wages below the living wage. They found factories where the staff had no days off. And this is just the tier 1 supplier factories. These are the ones Shein acknowledges as part of its chain. What happens upstream from there, in the cotton fields and the spinning mills, is even worse.And then in April 2025, Stop Uyghur Genocide UK published research showing that Shein had invested in and promoted an industrial park in Guangdong province called the Guangqing Textile and Garment Industry Orderly Transfer Park, which had been deliberately set up in cooperation with the Xinjiang Development and Reform Commission specifically to connect Xinjiang cotton and textile producers with major e-commerce platforms like Shein. Shein hosted an investment promotion event at the park in March 2024. The research concluded there was credible evidence that Shein knew what it was promoting, and that it was highly likely that clothes made or sold through that park contained Xinjiang textiles.

I've bought from Shein. I've bought from Temu. I've sat scrolling through a phone looking at a £4 t-shirt thinking how is that even possible, and at some level I already knew how it was possible. Deep down I knew. I just didn't want to know properly, because knowing properly

would have meant I couldn't click buy. So I let the thought pass and I clicked buy. I'm not proud of it. I'm telling you because the whole point of this book is that the feeling is inside us and we're trained to ignore it. I ignored it. For years. Now, you might be sitting there thinking fine, I'll stop shopping at Shein and Temu. I'll pay a bit more. I'll shop somewhere reputable. Primark. H&M. Boohoo. The middle tier of the high street.

I'm sorry to tell you this but it's not that simple.

Primark, to its credit, publishes a supplier map that shows the factories where its clothes are actually assembled. That's more transparency than most brands offer. By Primark's own account, that map covers roughly 95% of its products. Which sounds good until you realise what's not included in the other 5%, and what's not included even in the listed 95%.The map only shows tier 1 factories. Tier 1 means the final assembly stage, the factory where the cut fabric gets sewn into a finished garment. It doesn't show tier 2, the mills that wove the fabric. It doesn't show tier 3, the dye houses that coloured it. It doesn't show tier 4, the spinning mills that turned raw cotton into yarn. It doesn't show tier 5, the cotton farms themselves. And tier 4 and tier 5 are where forced labour is most concentrated, because they're the furthest from the brand's oversight and the hardest to audit.

In Indian spinning mills, there's something called the Sumangali scheme. It targets poor teenage girls from rural villages, typically between 14 and 18 years old. The deal is presented to their parents as an opportunity. The girl works in a spinning mill for 3 years, lives on site in a dormitory, and at the end of the 3 years receives a lump sum that's supposed to go towards her dowry. In reality, she's often confined to the factory compound, works 12 hour shifts, 6 or 7 days a week, for wages far below minimum wage, with no freedom of movement, and frequently doesn't receive the promised lump sum at the end. The International Labour Organization classifies it as a form of bonded labour. Several brands have been linked to mills using the Sumangali scheme over the years, not through deliberate sourcing but through the fact that their tier 2 and tier 3 suppliers use those mills and nobody further up the chain is looking. Then there's unauthorised subcontracting. This is when a tier 1 factory, the one that is on the brand's supplier map, takes an order it can't fulfil on time and quietly farms part of it out to a smaller unaudited workshop somewhere down the road. Rana Plaza, the factory building that collapsed in Bangladesh in 2013 killing 1,134 workers, was a case of unauthorised subcontracting. The brands whose labels were found in the rubble, which included Primark, Benetton, Walmart and others, had not knowingly sourced from Rana Plaza. The orders had been subcontracted out to it from listed factories. The brands usually only find out about this kind of thing when something goes wrong.

Then there are homeworkers. A huge amount of finishing work in the global garment industry, beading, embroidery, hand-stitching, crocheting, is sent out to women working from their homes in South Asia, paid by the piece, often earning a tiny fraction of the minimum wage, completely invisible to any audit because there is no factory to visit.Primark's own policy says a supplier factory only appears on its public map after a year of successful

production. So any factory in its first year of supplying Primark is, by definition, not on the map. There's always a rolling gap of unaudited new suppliers. And Primark is one of the more transparent ones. Most of the others don't even publish a tier 1 list.

Maybe you think, fine, I'll spend more. I'll go to the expensive end. I'll buy Prada, Vuitton, Ralph Lauren, Hugo Boss, Lacoste, proper brands, the kind of thing that costs £200 for a polo shirt. At least then I know I'm paying for quality and for workers being treated decently, right?This is where the whole system reveals itself for what it really is.In the 2020 report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 83 major international brands were named as directly or indirectly benefiting from Uyghur forced labour through labour transfer programmes. The list includes Ralph Lauren, Hugo Boss, Lacoste, Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein, Puma, Nike, Adidas, Fila, Hart Schaffner Marx, Zara, H&M, Uniqlo, and dozens more across electronics, automotive, and retail. Some of them have since cut ties or investigated. Others haven't. Some deny the findings. The list keeps growing.

Ralph Lauren in particular has been under formal investigation since 2023 by the Canadian Ombudsperson for Responsible Enterprise after a coalition of 28 human rights organisations filed a complaint. The complaint referenced bills of lading showing Ralph Lauren had imported more than 2 dozen unique shipments into Canada from Esquel Group subsidiaries, a Hong Kong textile manufacturer whose Xinjiang subsidiary Changji Esquel Textile had been placed on the US Commerce Department's Entity List for alleged use of forced labour. The complaint also cited research from Sheffield Hallam University's Helena Kennedy Centre linking Ralph Lauren to multiple companies named in Uyghur forced labour investigations. Ralph Lauren has publicly stated that it prohibits its suppliers from using any cotton grown in Xinjiang and has tried to block the Canadian investigation on jurisdictional grounds, arguing that the Canadian subsidiary isn't responsible for decisions made at head office in the United States.You can believe the denial if you want. But here's the thing. Even if Ralph Lauren is being completely honest, and even if its direct suppliers are not using Xinjiang cotton, the broader problem remains. Because Xinjiang cotton doesn't stay in Xinjiang. It gets shipped out to spinning mills in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Vietnam and elsewhere. It gets blended with cotton from other regions. It gets turned into fabric that's then sold to garment factories anywhere in Asia. By the time it reaches the tier 1 factory making your polo shirt, there's no label on it saying where it came from. Independent researchers at RTÉ in Ireland traced cotton from Xinjiang through at least 15 Bangladeshi factories in 2024 that supplied clothing to major Irish high street retailers. The cotton had been shipped from 2 companies directly linked to Chinese forced labour transfer programmes, laundered through Bangladesh, and arrived in Irish shops with labels like "sustainably sourced."

In 2022, US Customs and Border Protection seized shipments from Esquel's Vietnamese subsidiary, which had been originated outside China, because they suspected Xinjiang cotton had been laundered through the Vietnam operation. A 2025 analysis by the RAND Corporation found that while direct imports from Xinjiang to the US had dropped sharply since the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act came into force, US companies continued to

have considerable exposure to Xinjiang-tied firms in the second, third and fourth tiers of their supplier relationships. A KPMG survey found that 68% of companies were only reviewing tier 1 and tier 2 suppliers. Everything beyond that, where the forced labour actually happens, is in the dark.

So the depressing reality is that spending more doesn't necessarily buy you an ethical garment. It might buy you a slightly better cut and a label you can show your mates, but it doesn't guarantee that the cotton wasn't picked by someone who can't go home to their family. Nobody can guarantee that. The system is opaque by design because opacity is profitable. And this isn't just about cotton and clothes. The same pattern runs through almost everything we buy.Around 35% to 40% of the world's polysilicon, the material used to make solar panels, comes from Xinjiang. Several of the major polysilicon producers there have been linked to forced labour. So when a Western government proudly announces a push for renewable energy and installs solar panels everywhere, there's a significant chance those panels were built on the backs of Uyghurs in camps. Xinjiang produces around 12% of the world's titanium sponge, used in aerospace and automotive manufacturing. It produces 11% of the world's beryllium, used in defence, telecommunications and electronics. It produces hundreds of millions of lithium batteries a year, which go into smartphones, tablets, wind turbines and electric vehicles. The just transition, the whole green energy story we're being sold, is partly being built on Uyghur forced labour.

Then there's tomato paste. Around 1 in 4 tomatoes processed globally comes from Xinjiang. An investigation in 2024 found that tomato paste products labelled as Italian were likely to contain Chinese forced labour tomatoes that had been shipped to Italy, processed there, and rebranded. When you pick up a jar of pasta sauce with an Italian flag on the label, you have no way of knowing where the tomatoes came from.

Then there's cobalt for batteries from the Democratic Republic of Congo, a lot of it mined by children as young as 7 working in unregulated artisanal mines for a few dollars a day, feeding into the supply chain of every smartphone, laptop and electric vehicle on the planet.

Then there's cocoa from West Africa, where the International Labour Organization estimates around 1.56 million children are working in child labour on cocoa farms in Ivory Coast and Ghana alone, producing the chocolate we eat every day.

Then there's coffee, palm oil, fish from Thailand, bricks from Pakistan, garments from every corner of the developing world. The entire global supply chain, the thing that lets you buy a shirt for £4 or a smartphone for £500 or a chocolate bar for 80p, is held up at every level by people who cannot say no to the work they're doing, who cannot leave, who cannot complain, and who will never be seen by the people who buy the final product.

Earlier in this book I wrote about the transatlantic slave trade. About how the people who ran it, bought shares in it, profited from it and lived comfortable lives off it, all knew it was wrong. They knew. John Newton knew, and wrote a hymn about it. Thomas Jefferson knew, and owned 600 people anyway. The plantation owners in the American south told themselves complicated stories about why it was actually fine, because the alternative was giving up the lifestyle their wealth had built. And I wrote, with some satisfaction, that we can't judge them by modern standards because they were of their time. The implication being, obviously, that we would have been different. That we would have been the ones refusing to buy the sugar and the cotton.

That's the line that finished me when I started researching this chapter.

Because I am not different. I am exactly the same. The man in 1790s London buying sugar made by enslaved people in Jamaica, telling himself it's not his fault, the market exists, everyone's doing it, I'm not the one holding the whip, I just like it in my tea, that's me in 2025 buying a t-shirt from Shein. The only difference is 230 years and the fact that the people exploited are now far enough away and the chain has enough layers that I can pretend I don't know. But I do know. I've known for ages. I clicked buy anyway because it was convenient and because I could tell myself I was skint and couldn't afford to be particularly ethical.

Skint. I was skint. Right. A slave owner in 1800 could have said the exact same thing. "I can't afford to free them. The plantation wouldn't be viable. I'd lose the house. I'd lose everything my family has built. I know it's wrong in principle but I'm not in a position to do anything about it right now. Maybe when things are better."

We have not changed. We have just moved the suffering far enough away that we don't have to look at it over breakfast.

And the question that the reader has to sit with, the question I've had to sit with, is the one I've been asking in this book. Would you actually do it differently if you could? Would you actually pay more for a shirt if you knew the person who made it was treated with dignity? Would you actually buy half as many clothes if it meant the ones you bought weren't made by someone being held in a guarded dormitory in Guangdong? Would you actually refuse the £4 t-shirt?

I genuinely don't know what your answer is. I don't even fully trust my own answer yet. But I know this much. Until you've answered that question honestly, until you've sat with the discomfort of it and looked at your own wardrobe and your own habits and your own excuses, you cannot sit in judgement of anyone. Not the slave owner in 1800. Not the banker in 2008. Not the politician in Westminster. Not the CEO of Shein. Because until you've looked at your own hands, you're not in a position to point at anyone else's.

So what do we actually do? I'm not going to lecture you, because I haven't earned the right to lecture anyone. I'm still working it out myself. But here's what I'm doing and what I'm going to do from here on in.I'm buying less. A lot less. I don't need 20 t-shirts, I need 5. I don't need new stuff every season, I need stuff that lasts. The fast fashion model depends entirely on persuading us that we need to buy constantly. The moment enough of us stop, it collapses.I'm buying secondhand wherever I can. Charity shops. A secondhand garment is already in circulation. Buying it doesn't fund any new forced labour. It also costs a fraction of the price, so the "I'm skint" excuse disappears.I'm learning to repair things instead of replacing them. Sewing on a button. Fixing a small hole. Patching knees. There's a generation of us who were taught none of these skills because the stuff was always cheap enough to throw away. That was deliberate. Making us helpless made us better customers.I'm researching brands before I buy anything new. Not perfectly, because perfect information doesn't exist in this system by design. But checking whether the brand publishes a supplier list, whether it's been named in any investigations, whether it produces in countries with documented labour abuse. Good On You is a decent app and website for this kind of thing. They rate brands on labour, environment and animal welfare.I'm supporting small and local makers where I can. Not because small always means ethical, plenty of small brands have the same problems, but because a small local maker is usually someone whose entire supply chain you can actually trace, often all the way to them personally. And I'm accepting that this is uncomfortable. That I'll slip up. That I'll sometimes click buy on something I shouldn't have, and I'll notice it later, and I'll have to sit with it and do better next time. This isn't about achieving purity. Nobody achieves purity in a system this rigged. It's about waking up enough to stop lying to yourself about what you're part of.

This chapter is about the moment you realise the feeling you have, isn't just telling you to look at them. It's telling you to look at yourself. And that's the hardest thing the signal has ever asked us to do, because it means we can't just be angry at the banks and the politicians and the corporations and the priests. We have to be angry at ourselves, too. Or at least honest with ourselves. And then we have to do something about it. This was the chapter that made me realise I'm no better than any of the people we've talked about. I've ordered online thinking "that's a bargain, how can they even do it for that price." Well, deep down, I knew. I knew that someone somewhere was being taken advantage of. But ultimately it was convenient, and I could bat it off by saying "well I'm skint so I can't afford to be particularly ethical." I've talked about how the slave owners knew but they did it anyway, and how I can't judge 200 year old standards by today's standards. Are we any better? Would we really say okay, I'll pay more if I know workers are treated with dignity? Would we really buy less? Would we really go to the charity shop instead of Shein? Only you can answer that. But until you do, it's impossible to sit a judge others

I suppose it boils down to this , should we buy things made by people who aren't free?

Religion

Every chapter of this book has followed the same pattern. An institution that was supposed to serve people ends up serving itself. Finance, education, healthcare, justice, energy, welfare, media, science, all of them built on a reasonable idea that was gradually captured, distorted and turned into a mechanism of control. But all of those institutions are relatively modern. The oldest of them goes back a few hundred years. The pattern itself is much, much older. And to see where it really started, you have to go back to the place where the first institutions of all were built. Religion.

Now I want to be careful here because this isn't an attack on faith. Faith, genuine faith, the kind that comes from inside and doesn't need anyone's permission or approval, is one of the most powerful forces in human life. I've felt it myself. Not in a Kingdom Hall, not in a church, not in any building with a hierarchy and a collection plate, but in those moments of stillness where something connects and you know, without anyone telling you, that there's more to this than what you can see. What I'm questioning isn't the feeling. It's what was done with it.

Because when you actually lay the world's major religions side by side, stripped of their rituals and rules and cultural packaging, something remarkable happens. They agree. On almost everything that matters, they agree.

Every tradition says treat others well. Every tradition says control your ego and your desires. Every tradition says something greater than you exists. Every tradition says your actions have consequences. Every tradition says help the vulnerable, be honest, live with integrity. Every tradition says life has a deeper meaning beyond the material.

The Golden Rule, treat others as you'd want to be treated, appears independently in Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Confucianism, Taoism and Sikhism. These traditions developed across different continents, in different centuries, in different languages, among people who had no contact with each other. And yet the core ethical instruction is identical. Not similar. Identical.

Where they disagree is on the theology. The noise around the signal. Is there one God or many or none? Does the afterlife matter or should you focus on this life? Is evil an external cosmic force or something inside your own mind? Is worship necessary or unnecessary? These are the questions that have divided humanity for thousands of years, launched wars, justified persecutions, and built empires. And every single one of them is a question about the packaging, not the content.

The signal is always the same. Be good. Be honest. Help others. Think for yourself.

The noise is always institutional.

So if the ethical message is universal, where did it come from? And how did it get from one civilisation to another? Because there is a chain, and it's traceable, and the religion sitting at the centre of it is one that almost nobody in the Western world has heard of.

Zoroastrianism is roughly 3,000 years old. Its founder, Zoroaster, taught 3 principles: Humata, good thoughts. Hukhta, good words. Huvarshta, good deeds. Free will was central

to his teaching, you choose your path, you're not a puppet. There was no original sin, every person starts fresh. There was no eternal damnation, hell was corrective not permanent, a place of rehabilitation not punishment. You were supposed to enjoy life, to work, to marry, to create, to experience the world without guilt. Your relationship with God was a partnership, not a submission. You were expected to actively fight injustice because neutrality, Zoroaster said, sides with evil. Nature was sacred, earth, water, fire and air were to be protected. And there was no pressure to convert anyone, traditionally you were born into the faith.

If that sounds like the most reasonable, balanced and humane religious framework you've ever heard, that's because it probably is. But here's the part that matters for this book. Zoroastrianism didn't just teach those principles. It introduced concepts that would go on to shape every major Western religion that followed. Heaven and hell. Final judgment after death. Angels and demons as named specific beings. Satan as a cosmic adversary. Resurrection of the body. A saviour figure who arrives at the end of time. The cosmic battle between good and evil. One supreme God. Most of these ideas appeared in Zoroastrianism before they appeared anywhere else.

And the transmission point is documented.

In 586 BCE, the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, destroyed Solomon's Temple, and dragged the Jewish population into exile. For roughly 50 years, the Jews lived under foreign rule. Then Persia, a Zoroastrian empire, conquered Babylon. The Persian king Cyrus the Great freed the Jews and even funded the rebuilding of their Temple. During those decades of exile and then life under Persian rule, the Jews were immersed in Zoroastrian culture and theology.

The effect on Jewish scripture is unmistakable. Before the Babylonian exile, the Hebrew texts contain no heaven and no hell. Just Sheol, a grey, vague underworld where everyone goes regardless of how they lived. No named angels. No Satan as a cosmic enemy, just a minor functionary in God's court. No resurrection. No end times. No saviour figure. God is tribal and national, concerned primarily with one people.

After the exile, Jewish scripture suddenly contains all of it. Heaven and hell. Named angels, Michael, Gabriel. Satan as an adversary. Resurrection of the dead. A coming Messiah. Final judgment. The cosmic battle between good and evil. God as universal.

Most of those additions already existed in Zoroastrianism. The mainstream academic position is that the Jews absorbed Zoroastrian theology while living under Persian rule and carried it home with them. The timeline matches, the concepts match, and the transmission route is historically documented.

From that point the chain is clear. Judaism, now saturated with Zoroastrian ideas, produced the Essenes, a desert community that rejected the corrupt Jerusalem Temple, practised communal living, shared property, performed baptism, and preserved texts including the War Scroll, which reads like a Zoroastrian cosmic battle written in Jewish language. John the Baptist was almost certainly connected to them. Jesus emerged from this Zoroastrian-infused Judaism and restated the core message, adding radical inclusivity, love your enemies, a personal relationship with God. He was crucified. His message was

immediately fought over. Islam followed 600 years later, claiming to confirm what came before.

But the chain goes back even further than Zoroaster.

In Egypt, roughly 3,100 BCE, the concept of Ma'at governed everything. Ma'at wasn't a god you worshipped, it was a principle you lived by. Cosmic truth, justice, balance, order. Right action, right speech, honesty, fairness. Even the gods themselves were subject to Ma'at. The Book of the Dead, dating to roughly 2,500 BCE, contains what are called the Negative Confessions, declarations the dead person makes before their heart is weighed against the feather of Ma'at. "I have not killed. I have not stolen. I have not lied. I have not caused suffering. I have not been greedy." The Ten Commandments, roughly 1,000 years before Moses.

Then around 1,350 BCE, a pharaoh called Akhenaten did something unprecedented. He scrapped the entire Egyptian pantheon and declared there was only one God, the Aten. He was the first verifiable monotheist in recorded history. One generation before Moses according to the traditional dating. After his death, his monuments were demolished, his name was chiselled from records, his city was abandoned, and his successor Tutankhamun restored the old gods. The establishment won. The pattern that this book has described in every chapter, the institution destroying the messenger and reverting to the old system, was already happening 3,400 years ago.

And the evidence we have for all of this is not limited to religious texts and traditions. Some of it was physically buried and only rediscovered in the 20th century.

In 1945, in the Egyptian desert near the town of Nag Hammadi, a farmer digging for fertiliser found a sealed clay jar containing 13 leather-bound codices. Inside were 52 texts, written in Coptic, that had been buried around 367 CE to protect them from destruction after the bishop of Alexandria ordered all non-approved texts burned. These were the Gnostic gospels, and they had been hidden for over 1,600 years.

The Gospel of Thomas contains 114 sayings attributed to Jesus, with no narrative, no miracles, no resurrection story, no church, no priesthood. Just words. "The kingdom of God is within you and all around you. Split a piece of wood and I am there. Lift a stone and you will find me." "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you don't bring forth what is within you, what you don't bring forth will destroy you." "The Pharisees and scholars have taken the keys to knowledge and hidden them. They haven't entered and they won't let others enter." No building required. No institution. No hierarchy between you and the truth.

The Gospel of Mary describes Jesus saying that sin is not what the institution says it is. Sin is acting against your own true nature. "Don't lay down any rules beyond what I've given you, and don't create laws like a legislator, or you'll be bound by them." After Jesus leaves, the male disciples collapse. Mary holds them together. Peter admits she knows more than he does, then rejects her because she's a woman. Levi defends her. Peter's faction won. The church was built on the wrong disciple's ego. And the text describes 4 hostile powers that the soul must overcome: Darkness, Desire, Ignorance and Wrath. Those same 4 forces are

exactly the mechanisms every institution in this book has used to maintain control. Fear of the outside world. Promise of reward. Controlled information. Punishment for questioning.

The Gospel of Judas, which wasn't found at Nag Hammadi but surfaced separately through the Egyptian antiquities market in the 1970s and wasn't published until 2006, turns the entire crucifixion narrative inside out. Jesus laughs at the disciples' prayers because they're worshipping the wrong God. Only Judas truly understands where Jesus came from. The betrayal wasn't a betrayal, it was a mission. Jesus asked Judas to do it. "You will sacrifice the man that clothes me," shedding the material body so the spirit could be freed.

The Gospel of Truth says ignorance, not sin, is the root of all suffering. Jesus came to wake people up, not to die for them. Error itself killed him, the system destroyed the messenger. Awakening is simply remembering what was always true, like waking from a nightmare.

A year or two after Nag Hammadi, in caves near the Dead Sea at Qumran, another discovery was made. 981 texts belonging to the Essenes, including copies of every book of the Hebrew Bible except Esther, some of them 1,000 years older than the oldest previously known copies. And they proved something the institution had always denied. The Bible had been edited.

Over half the biblical manuscripts found at Qumran don't match what became the standard Bible. The most striking example is Deuteronomy 32:8. In the Dead Sea Scrolls version, the text reads "sons of God," referring to multiple divine beings. In the later Masoretic version, the text was changed to "sons of Israel," edited to erase the fact that early Israelite religion was not originally monotheistic. Someone, at some point, deliberately rewrote the text to support a theological position that didn't exist when the words were first written.

The Old Testament as we know it was primarily written between 600 and 400 BCE, during and after the Babylonian exile, by people who had been living under Zoroastrian Persia. Genesis and Exodus were compiled and edited during this period. The Book of Daniel was written around 165 BCE, roughly 400 years after the events it describes. The Masoretes didn't standardise the Hebrew text until between the 7th and 10th centuries CE. What we call the Bible is not one book written at one time by one author. It's a collection of texts, written across centuries by different people with different agendas, edited repeatedly to serve institutional purposes, with alternative versions suppressed and the evidence of those alternatives hidden in caves and desert jars.

Now here's the thing that struck me, and once it did I couldn't see past it. It was so obvious I'm not sure how I missed it for so long.

All this time I've been talking about good versus evil as if it's some external cosmic battle, the way Zoroaster framed it, the way the institutions have always framed it. Heaven against hell. God against Satan. Light against darkness. Big armies on both sides, fighting it out somewhere we can't see, and we're all just spectators waiting to be told which side won. That framing has been useful to every institution that ever existed because it puts the battle outside of you. It makes you a passenger. It means you need someone else, a priest, a church, a holy book, a saviour, to tell you which side you're on and what to do about it.

But that's not what any of the messengers actually said when you read them carefully. Zoroaster didn't say there's a cosmic battle being fought somewhere far away that you need to pick a side in. He said you face the choice every single day, in every single moment, and the choice is yours. Good thoughts. Good words. Good deeds. That's it. That's the entire instruction. It's a personal daily decision, repeated for as long as you're alive, made by you, no priest required. Buddha said the same thing in different language. The war is in your own mind. The suffering comes from inside you, the freedom comes from inside you, and nobody else can do the work for you. The Gospel of Thomas saying 70 puts it as plainly as it can be put. If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you don't bring forth what is within you, what you don't bring forth will destroy you.

The kingdom of God is within you. Not next to you. Not above you. Not waiting for you in some other realm if you obey the rules. Within you. Right now. Already there.

And the choice is staggeringly simple. You can live a life of taking, of self-service, of putting yourself first and treating everyone else as either an obstacle or a resource. Or you can live a life of giving, of caring, of putting others first, of treating every person you meet as deserving of the same consideration you'd want for yourself. We are all born capable of both. Nobody is one or the other from birth. Every day, in every interaction, you choose which path you're walking. That's it. That's the whole battle. And it's been hiding in plain sight since the first messenger opened their mouth.

So why didn't anyone just say it like that? Why all the layers and interpretations and institutions and rules?

Because every person who ever heard the message added their own layer to it. Some added it accidentally because they couldn't help but interpret what they heard through the lens of their own culture and language. Some added it deliberately because they realised that complexity was useful, that the more complicated you make something the more you need someone to explain it, and that someone can charge for the service. Either way the result was the same. A simple instruction that a child could understand became a vast architecture of doctrine, ritual, hierarchy and rule. The signal got buried under the noise. The kingdom that was inside everyone got moved to a building on a hill that you needed permission to enter.

And I'll tell you exactly how I know all of this is true, because I'm a perfect example of it. I spent over 10 years watching documentaries, reading, asking questions, slowly understanding how every institution I could think of was corrupted from the inside out. I saw the pattern in finance, in healthcare, in politics, in media, in religion. I felt it in my bones from the age of 10 in the back of my mum's car. And then, with all of that knowledge, I went and started a business, tried to raise investment to scale it and somehow convinced myself that this institution would be different. That my one would somehow escape the gravity that pulled every other institution in human history toward corruption.

I'm the disciples Jesus laughed at in the Gospel of Judas. I'd spent years being told and still went down the wrong path anyway. And I'm not alone in that, not even close. I'm every person who thinks the next political leader will be the one that finally changes things. I'm every person who thinks their religion is the right one and the others have it wrong. I'm every person who joins the cult, signs up for the programme, follows the guru, buys the book that

promises to fix everything. I'm every plaster we slap over the wound while ignoring what's actually causing it. We are all looking outside ourselves for the thing that was always inside us. That's the trick. That's the trap. The institution doesn't have to do anything except wait for us to come looking, because we always do, and we always will, until we stop and realise that the only thing we ever needed to change was ourselves.

And here's where it gets practical. Because if the battle is personal, and if the choice is daily, and if the kingdom is already inside you, then the question becomes: how do you actually find it? When you're tired and stressed and angry and the world is shouting at you from every direction, when the path isn't obvious and you're not sure what the right thing to do is, how do you stop and listen to the part of yourself that already knows?

Every tradition has the same answer. Stillness. Silence. Going inward. The Buddhist calls it meditation. The Christian mystic calls it contemplative prayer. The Sufi calls it dhikr. The Quaker sits in silence and waits. The Hindu meditates on the breath or a mantra. The Zoroastrian prays facing fire. Different cultures, different words, identical practice. Stop talking. Stop doing. Stop consuming. Sit. Breathe. Listen.

And science has caught up with what those traditions have known for thousands of years. Studies have shown that regular meditation produces measurable physical changes in the brain. Increased grey matter in the regions associated with self-awareness, emotional regulation and decision making. Reduced activity in the amygdala, the part of the brain that drives fear and reactive anger. Stronger connections between the prefrontal cortex, where deliberate thinking happens, and the limbic system, where emotion lives. Researchers at Virginia Tech put meditators and non-meditators through a fairness experiment called the ultimatum game. The non-meditators rejected unfair offers out of pride and disgust, even when accepting would have been in their interest. The meditators were more likely to respond rationally and prosocially. Brain scans showed they were using completely different neural networks to make the decision. A separate study from INSEAD and Wharton found that just 15 minutes of focused breathing meditation reduced what's called the sunk cost bias, the tendency to keep throwing good money after bad because you can't admit you were wrong. Reviews of the research consistently show that meditation, both short and long term, improves moral decision making, increases altruism and prosocial behaviour, reduces selfish bias, and enhances empathy. The harder you look, the clearer it gets. Sitting still and paying attention literally rewires the brain in ways that make you more likely to choose the path the messengers were pointing at.

And there's something else worth mentioning, and I'm aware some people will close this book the moment I do, but it's relevant and the research is increasingly difficult to ignore. For thousands of years, indigenous cultures across South America have used a plant brew called ayahuasca, and various other cultures have used psilocybin mushrooms and other natural psychedelics, in religious and healing ceremonies. The active ingredient in ayahuasca is dimethyltryptamine, DMT, a molecule which the human brain is also capable of producing on its own, although nobody fully understands when or why. These substances were dismissed for decades as recreational drugs and lumped in with everything else the institution wanted to keep illegal. But over the last 20 years, serious scientific research has been quietly happening, and the results are remarkable.

Studies on people who have taken ayahuasca, psilocybin or DMT in controlled settings consistently show the same effects. Increased empathy. Increased compassion. A stronger sense of connection with other people and with nature. A reduction in fear, anxiety and depression that often persists for months after a single experience. Long-term ayahuasca users score significantly higher on measures of helpfulness, self-transcendence, and what researchers call spiritual acceptance. A meta-analysis of psychedelic studies found that what participants describe as "mystical experiences" during the sessions are correlated with lasting positive changes in personality, prosocial behaviour, and a reduction in selfish or harmful patterns. One large survey of psychedelic users found significantly higher rates of pro-environmental behaviour and connection to nature compared to non-users. People who participated in ayahuasca ceremonies attributed lasting improvements in their relationships to the experience, citing increases in empathy, gratitude, unconditional love, compassion, tolerance and honesty. Those are not vague spiritual claims. Those are the specific things participants reported, and the research is published in peer-reviewed journals.

I'm not telling you to take psychedelics. That's a personal decision and it's not something to be entered into lightly or without proper support. What I'm telling you is that the things ancient cultures said these substances did, the things shamans and spiritual teachers have been saying for thousands of years, are now being confirmed in laboratories by people in white coats with brain scanners. Increased empathy. Connection. Compassion. A reduction in the ego, the part of you that wants to take rather than give. The same outcomes that meditation produces, just faster and more dramatically. Both are pointing at the same thing. There is a state of mind, accessible to anyone willing to do the work, in which the choice between selfish and selfless becomes obvious. Where the noise of the institution dies down and the signal underneath becomes clear.

And running through all of it, from Ma'at through Zoroaster through the Essenes through Jesus through the Gnostics, is the same cycle. Someone states the truth simply. Followers gather. An institution forms. The institution captures the message. Power corrupts it. A new voice emerges. The institution kills, exiles, erases or absorbs them. Almost every single time.

The Gospel of Mary gave it a name 2,000 years ago. The 4 powers: Darkness, Desire, Ignorance, Wrath. Fear the outside world. Promise paradise. Control information. Punish anyone who questions. That's not just a description of ancient religion. That's the operating manual of every institution this book has examined. The banks use it. The education system uses it. The healthcare system uses it. The welfare system uses it. The media uses it. The mechanism is 2,000 years old and it hasn't changed because it doesn't need to. It works.

The Good Shepherd metaphor appears in almost every tradition. Jesus said "I am the good shepherd" and "I have other sheep not of this fold," meaning the truth isn't limited to one group. In Egypt, the pharaoh carried a shepherd's crook. Psalm 23 says "the Lord is my shepherd," no anger, no threats, just guidance. Zoroaster described God as a guardian who gives free will. Buddha said "I can only show you the path, you must walk it yourself."

The metaphor is the theory. The sheep are decent people who naturally drift, not because they're bad but because they're human. The good shepherd is the periodic messenger who appears, doesn't force anyone, just restates the direction. The hired hands are the

institutions, they look like shepherds but they don't care about the sheep, they build fences, charge for access to pasture that was always free, and when a real shepherd shows up they kill him, put his picture on the fence, and charge admission.

That is the story of religion. The signal arrives, the institution captures it. The signal arrives again. The institution captures it again. And the only thing that's ever broken the cycle, even temporarily, is the moment when enough ordinary people hear the signal directly and stop needing the institution to translate it for them.

The question this book has been asking from the very first page is a simple one. What if the thing I felt as a 10 year old in the back of that car, the sense that something was wrong, that the institution didn't match the truth it claimed to represent, what if that feeling wasn't rebellion? What if it was recognition?

Because the same instinct that told me at 10 years old that the Kingdom Hall didn't feel right is the same instinct that told the Gnostics 2,000 years ago that the message was being hijacked. It's the same instinct that made Zoroaster say fight injustice rather than accept it. It's the same instinct that made Jesus say the kingdom of god is within you, not inside a building. It's the same instinct that has appeared in every culture, every century, every continent, in people who never met each other and never read the same books.

Be good. Be honest. Help others. Think for yourself. Choose, every day, the path that puts others first. Sit still long enough to hear the part of you that already knows.

The signal is always simple. The noise is always institutional.

And the signal keeps coming back.

The Messengers

If the last chapter laid out the pattern, this one introduces the people who tried to share it, the signal didn't transmit itself. In every age, in every civilisation, someone has stood up and said it out loud. And in almost every case, the institution made them pay for it.

What follows is not a complete list. It can't be. There are voices in this story that were erased so thoroughly we'll never know their names, others I simply haven't come across, there will be many, many more names , of that I'm sure. Here are some, spread out across 5,000 years of human history, they tell a story so consistent it's difficult to dismiss as coincidence.

The earliest ethical framework we can verify is Ma'at in Egypt, going back over 5,000 years. Truth, justice, balance. Not a god to be worshipped but a principle to be lived. By 2,500 BCE the Book of the Dead contained moral declarations that predate the Ten Commandments by a millennium. Then Akhenaten around 1,350 BCE declared one God, scrapped the entire priesthood, and was erased from history within a generation. First verifiable monotheist. First verifiable example of the institution destroying the messenger.

Zoroaster, somewhere between 1,500 and 600 BCE, taught good thoughts, good words, good deeds and was persecuted for years before anyone listened. His words survive in the Gathas, 17 hymns in Old Avestan, and they shaped everything that came after. Homer around 800 BCE embedded ethical truth in art so powerful the institution couldn't burn it without looking foolish. He showed the gods as petty and unreliable and humans as the real moral agents, which was a radical statement disguised as entertainment.

Then came the Axial Age, roughly 500 BCE, and this is the part that nobody can explain. Across 3 continents, with no contact between them, a cluster of voices emerged simultaneously. Buddha in India rejected the Vedic priesthood, the caste system and animal sacrifice. Confucius in China rejected superstition and focused on ethics. Mahavira, in the same region as Buddha at almost the same time, founded Jainism on the principle of non-violence. Laozi articulated the Tao. And in Greece, Socrates started asking questions that powerful people couldn't answer.

Socrates is worth pausing on because his story is the template. He didn't claim to have answers. He said he knew nothing. His method was to ask questions, simple honest questions, and let the person he was talking to realise they didn't know what they thought they knew. The powerful people of Athens found this intolerable, not because he was wrong but because he was making them look foolish in public. They charged him with corrupting the youth and not believing in the city's gods. He could have escaped, he refused, he drank the hemlock surrounded by his students.

Diogenes took it further. He lived in a ceramic jar, owned nothing, and when Alexander the Great, the most powerful man in the world, asked what he could do for him, Diogenes said "you could step out of my sunlight." He walked around Athens in broad daylight carrying a lit lantern, saying he was looking for an honest man. The institution didn't know what to do with him because he wanted nothing from it and therefore couldn't be controlled.

Epicurus taught that the gods don't care about us, so religion based on divine reward and punishment is manipulation. He said death is nothing to fear, that simple living and close friendships are the path to a good life, and he opened his school to women, slaves and foreigners, which was unheard of. The institution systematically misrepresented him for 2,000 years, turning "Epicurean" into a byword for indulgence when his actual teaching was the opposite.

In the centuries before Jesus, the pattern was already established. The Essenes rejected the corrupt Temple and preserved their truth in caves. The Teacher of Righteousness, a mysterious figure from their community, was persecuted by the religious establishment and killed. His followers believed he was a messianic figure who would return. The Jesus pattern, decades or possibly a century before Jesus.

Then Jesus himself. He restated the core message within a Judaism already saturated with Zoroastrian ideas. Love your enemies. The kingdom is within you. Don't judge. Help the poor, his message was immediately fought over. Peter's faction won. Mary Magdalene, who understood best according to the Gnostic texts, was erased. The institution was built on the version of the message that was most useful to the institution, not the version that was most true.

The Gnostics said this was happening in real time. They wrote it down. Their texts were buried in the desert to save them. For 1,600 years nobody knew they existed. When they were found in 1945, they confirmed exactly what you'd expect if you've been paying attention to this book. The message was hijacked from the start. The people who saw it happening were silenced and the evidence was literally buried.

After Christianity became the state religion of Rome, the pattern accelerated. Plotinus taught that all reality flows from a single divine source, accessible directly through contemplation, no priests needed. Mani around 216 CE explicitly claimed to be next in line after Zoroaster, Buddha and Jesus, saying each messenger brought the same truth to a different culture. He was executed by the Zoroastrian priesthood, and then every institution he threatened, Christian, Zoroastrian and Muslim, cooperated to destroy his religion. When the messenger says all institutions are distortions, all institutions unite against him.

Hypatia of Alexandria, the last great philosopher of the ancient world, mathematician, astronomer, beloved by pagans, Christians and Jews alike, was dragged from her chariot by a Christian mob, stripped and murdered in a church around 415 CE. The symbolic end of the classical world: a woman, a deep thinker, killed by the institution that claimed to follow a man who said love your enemies.

The Islamic Golden Age produced voices that burn with the same fire. Ali ibn Abi Talib, son-in-law of Muhammad, said "people are of two types, they are either your brothers in faith or your equals in humanity." He called for mercy for his own killer. He was assassinated while praying. Rabia al-Adawiyya, a freed slave woman, dismantled the entire transactional model of religion: "O God, if I worship you for fear of hell, burn me in hell. If I worship you in hope of paradise, exclude me from paradise. But if I worship you for your own sake, do not withhold from me your everlasting beauty." Mansur al-Hallaj said "I am the Truth," meaning divinity is within. He was crucified, dismembered and burned. A man saying the same thing as the Gnostics, killed in the same way as Jesus, for the same reason. Omar Khayyam,

mathematician, astronomer, poet, said life is short, be kind, don't trust religious authorities who claim certainty about things nobody can know. Marginalised as "just a poet." Rumi said forget rituals, God is love, find it within. His words have since been absorbed and commercialised, turned into Instagram quotes stripped of their radical context.

The Black Death in the 14th century shattered the church's credibility across Europe and opened a window. Meister Eckhart said "the eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me" and was condemned as a heretic. Jan Hus said everything Martin Luther would say a century later, was invited to a church council under a guarantee of safe conduct, was arrested and burned alive. The safe conduct was declared void because promises to heretics don't count.

Kabir in India rejected both Hinduism and Islam while affirming the truth in each: "I am not Hindu nor Muslim. The God who made the world is my God." Guru Nanak founded Sikhism on the principle of one God, all people equal, rituals meaningless, and deliberately built practical alternatives to the institution, free communal kitchens, leaderless worship, selfless service. No priesthood, no caste, no hierarchy. Then Martin Luther nailed his theses to the door in 1517 and the printing press meant the correction couldn't be contained. But within a generation Luther's reformation had become its own institution with its own problems.

The Anabaptists in the 1520s said baptism should be a conscious adult choice, Christians shouldn't hold political office or fight wars, and community should be voluntary. They were slaughtered by both Catholics and Protestants.

Then came George Fox, the son of a Leicestershire weaver, born in 1624. No formal education. No theological training. No connections to power. He'd been apprenticed to a cobbler and worked as a shepherd. By 19 he was wandering the country in a spiritual crisis, going from church to church, priest to priest, looking for someone who could speak to what he was feeling inside. Nobody could. Every minister he met left him cold. He later wrote that he found no comfort in any of them.

In 1647, alone and exhausted from searching, he had a breakthrough. He realised he didn't need a priest, a church, a university-educated minister or anyone else standing between him and God. The truth was already inside him, what he called the "inner light." And it wasn't just inside him, it was inside everyone. You didn't need anyone's permission to access it.

He started preaching in 1648 and what he said was a direct threat to every religious institution in England. Every person has direct access to God, no clergy needed, no hierarchy, no intermediary. All people are equal, so he refused to remove his hat for judges, magistrates or anyone who considered themselves his social superior. He used "thee" and "thou" for everyone including the king, because the formal "you" implied deference to rank. Oaths are wrong because they imply you might lie the rest of the time, and Quakers always tell the truth so swearing is redundant. War is wrong, violence is wrong, and he turned down a captaincy in Cromwell's army. Women can preach, and he published a work called Women's Speaking Justified in 1667 arguing that the spirit of Christ lives in both men and women equally. Tithes are wrong because you shouldn't be forced to fund a church you don't believe in. And churches aren't holy, he called them "steeple-houses" and said the ground they stood on was no more sacred than a hillside.

The institution responded the way it always responds. Fox was imprisoned 8 times between 1649 and 1675. At Derby in 1650 a judge mocked his instruction to "tremble at the word of the Lord" and called his followers "Quakers," a name meant as an insult that stuck. At Carlisle in 1653 it was proposed to execute him, but Parliament intervened saying they'd rather not have "a young man die for religion." At Launceston Castle he was thrown into the lowest dungeon called Doomsdale, usually reserved for witches and murderers, a place from which few came back alive. On the wall of that dungeon Fox wrote: "I was never in prison, that it was not the means of bringing multitudes out of their prisons."

By 1660 there were 50,000 Quakers in England. Thousands were imprisoned under laws specifically designed to suppress them. 3 were hanged in Massachusetts, including Mary Dyer, a grandmother, whose statue now stands on Boston Common. Margaret Fell, who would become Fox's wife, was sentenced to life in prison. Fox himself converted his jailers on at least 2 separate occasions. The man they threw in a dungeon to shut up ended up convincing the people guarding him.

What Fox built was the closest thing to a corruption-proof religious model anyone has ever designed. No clergy. No hierarchy. No creed. No sacraments. Worship in silence until someone feels moved to speak. Decisions made collectively. Leadership diffused deliberately so no cult of personality could form. Among the first to oppose slavery, advocate for women's equality, practise conscientious objection and insist on prison reform. 350 years later, there are only about 380,000 Quakers worldwide. The corruption-proof model doesn't scale. It proves that corruption isn't a bug in the system, it's what happens when the system gets big enough to attract the people who want power.

Spinoza said God is nature, everything that exists is God expressing itself, and the Bible was written by humans and should be studied as a historical document. Excommunicated at 23. Refused every academic position offered to him. Died at 44 grinding lenses. Thomas Paine said "my own mind is my own church" and helped inspire 2 revolutions. He died in poverty with 6 people at his funeral because he dared criticise the church. His bones were lost and have never been found.

Francis of Assisi stripped naked, walked away from his family's wealth, lived in absolute poverty, cared for lepers, and during the Crusades walked unarmed across enemy lines to talk to the Sultan. He watched his own order betray his teaching while he was still alive. He was declared a saint 2 years after his death and absorbed into the institution as a marketing asset. The man who rejected the church's wealth became the church's most profitable brand.

This next part feels very personal so I want to talk about Tolstoy. When I started this book all I knew about him was that he wrote *War and Peace* and a few other respected novels, the kind of books you nod at on a shelf and never actually pick up. It wasn't until I was coming towards the end of writing this that I started really looking into him, and what I found felt like more than a coincidence.

Tolstoy was a Russian aristocrat. Born into wealth, owned an enormous estate with hundreds of serfs working it, married, had children, and by his 40s he was one of the most famous writers in the world. *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* had made him internationally celebrated. He had everything a person is told to want despite all this he was

suicidal. He hid the ropes in his house from himself in case he hanged himself, and stopped going hunting in case he turned the gun on himself. A man with everything, feeling nothing.

I didn't have his privilege, not even close. I had my own version of it. I partied through my twenties, threw myself into things I was good at, built a business, told myself the next thing would be the thing that finally made sense of it all. By the end of it I was exhausted and lost, mentally and physically wrecked, with no idea what I was doing or why. I'm the same age now as Tolstoy was when he wrote *A Confession*, the book where he tried to work out what had gone wrong inside him.

He looked at the rich and saw they were as miserable as he was. He looked at the church and found it had betrayed everything Jesus had actually taught. He looked at the peasants on his own estate and realised they had something he didn't, a simple, lived faith that didn't need a priest or a doctrine to validate it. Then he went back to the source material himself, read the Gospels properly without the institution standing between him and the words, and came to the conclusion that the entire structure of the church was a betrayal of the simple ethical instruction Jesus had actually given. Be good. Be honest. Don't accumulate wealth. Don't return violence with violence. Treat every person as your equal. The kingdom of God is within you. When reading what he wrote and comparing it with what i've been trying to explain, it could be considered plagiarism and all I can tell you is something made me look a little deeper than his early novels to spot the coincidence

In 1894 he published a book called exactly that. *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*. The title is lifted straight from Luke 17:21, which is in every Bible the church has ever printed. It's not from a buried text or a suppressed gospel, it's right there in the official version, on a page every priest and every congregation has had access to for 2,000 years. They just chose to over complicate it. Tolstoy didn't need to dig up Nag Hammadi or read the Dead Sea Scrolls. He just read the book the church had handed him and noticed they weren't doing what it said.

The Russian Orthodox Church excommunicated him in 1901. The state hated him because he refused to recognise its authority. He gave away his copyrights so anyone could print his work for free. He tried to give away his estate but his wife wouldn't let him. At 82, in the middle of a Russian winter, he finally walked out of his own house with almost nothing, trying to live the life he'd been writing about. He died 10 days later in a railway station.

A young Indian lawyer in South Africa read *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* and it changed his life. The two of them exchanged letters in the final year of Tolstoy's life. That young lawyer was Mohandas Gandhi. Tolstoy's argument about non-resistance to evil, about refusing to participate in unjust systems, became Gandhi's satyagraha. Gandhi inspired Martin Luther King. King inspired countless others. A line from Luke, ignored by the institution that printed it, was rediscovered by a depressed Russian aristocrat who handed it to an Indian lawyer who handed it to an American preacher.

100 years and an entire continent apart, Tolstoy and I came to the same conclusion. Neither of us was a messenger, neither of us had a vision. We just paid attention to the actual message , stripped of the dogma and the signal that has been there the whole time finally got through.

There are others too, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, refused to pick sides in the Vietnam War and said "when another person makes you suffer, it is because he suffers deeply within himself. He does not need punishment, he needs help." Exiled for 39 years. Desmond Tutu said "if you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor." Pure Zoroaster, 3,000 years later, on the other side of the world.

Vaclav Havel proved that entire political systems can be collapsed simply by refusing to pretend. The Soviet bloc didn't fall because of military defeat. It fell because enough people stopped pretending to believe in it. The Berlin Wall came down because ordinary people walked up to it and said no more. Havel was imprisoned repeatedly. Then he became president.

John Lennon had every reason to stay quiet. By 1969 he was one of the most famous men alive, a Beatle, a millionaire, he could have lived the rest of his life on a yacht and nobody would have blamed him. Instead he married Yoko Ono and spent their honeymoon in a hotel bed in Amsterdam, in pyjamas, with the world's press invited in for 12 hours a day, underneath hand-painted signs that said "Bed Peace." He understood something most activists never figure out. If you want a message to travel, you wrap it in something the media cannot resist pointing a camera

In a Montreal hotel room a few weeks later, he wrote "Give Peace a Chance" in an afternoon. 5 months later, 250,000 people at an anti-war protest in Washington sang it back on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. That Christmas, he and Yoko put up billboards in 11 cities around the world with a single line. War is over if you want it. No party, no programme, no demands, just the plain statement that ordinary people already had the power to end the war and were choosing not to use it. Then in 1971 he released "Imagine," a song that asks the listener to do just one thing, picture a world without the things we've been told are permanent. No countries. No religion. No possessions. Everyone sharing everything. He just asks you to imagine it.

The response from the institution was the same as always. In 1972 the Nixon White House, worried Lennon would mobilise young voters against the president's re-election, ordered the FBI to put him under surveillance and the Immigration service to deport him. J. Edgar Hoover personally took charge. Agents tapped his phones and followed him around New York. The CIA got involved under an illegal domestic surveillance programme. When a historian later tried to get Lennon's FBI file released, the government blocked him for 14 years on "national security" grounds. 14 years of legal battles over the paperwork about why a man with a guitar singing "give peace a chance" was a threat to the most powerful country on earth.

Lennon won the fight in 1975, got his green card, and went into quiet retirement with his young son. In December 1980, after releasing his first album in 5 years, he was shot 4 times in the back outside his own front door by a man who had asked him to sign a copy of the same album a few hours earlier. He was 40 years old.

Bob Marley reached more people with the core message than any preacher alive. His medium was music, not sermons. Love, unity, resist oppression, question authority. He survived an assassination attempt in 1976 and died of cancer at 36. A West African spiritual

tradition surviving the Middle Passage, adapted to Caribbean culture, broadcasting the signal globally through a sound system in Kingston, Jamaica.

And finally Aaron Swartz, who believed that academic research funded by public money should be freely accessible to the public who paid for it. He downloaded millions of academic papers to share them. He was charged with 13 felonies and faced 35 years in prison. For sharing papers. He died at 26. Gospel of Thomas, saying 39: the Pharisees took the keys to knowledge and hidden them. They haven't entered and they won't let others enter. That was written 2,000 years ago and it described Aaron Swartz's prosecutors exactly.

These people were saying the same thing, the details varied, the language changed and the cultural packaging was different. But the core instruction, stripped of everything else, is identical. Be good. Be honest. Help others. Think for yourself. Don't let anyone stand between you and the truth.

And they were all punished for saying it. Executed, exiled, excommunicated, imprisoned, assassinated, erased, absorbed, marginalised, or simply ignored until they were safely dead and could be turned into a harmless symbol.

The institution doesn't fear the message. The institution fears the messenger. Because the message on its own is just words. But a person living it, spreading it, visibly, in front of everyone, that's dangerous. That's the thing that makes other people wonder if they could do the same, if enough start wondering, the institution loses its grip.

The Signal

So where does this leave us?

If you've read this far you might be feeling one of two things. Either a quiet fury at the scale of what's been described, or a kind of exhaustion, a sense that the problem is so vast, so embedded, so old that nothing can be done about it. I understand both. I've felt both. Sometimes in the same afternoon. I didn't write this book to leave you there. I didn't spend 17 years pulling at this thread just to show you the mess and walk away. There are things that work, things that have been proven and most of them are simpler than you'd expect.

There's a video that went viral a few years back, I think about it a lot. It's a man who is standing on a hillside at a music festival. Maybe 200 people are sitting on the grass around him. He starts dancing. Not performing, not showing off, just dancing, the way you might in your bedroom when nobody's watching. A few people film him, you can hear giggles, he does look ridiculous but he doesn't care. Most people who've shared this video say he's the hero, the leader who started a movement, I don't think that's right.
After a couple of minutes of dancing on his own, another young man gets up, walks over and joins him. They dance together, everyone else is still sitting, still watching, still safe on the grass. Then the second guy waves to a friend, come on. The friend after the signal heads over.

That for me is the moment.

I know what that hesitation feels like. I've seen people dancing on their own and desperately wanting to join them, and every time that inner voice says no, you'll look stupid, people will laugh, sit down, stay where you are. That voice isn't yours, it was put there by every institution, every classroom, every system that ever told you to sit still, be quiet, stay in line and don't make a scene. So the second guy, the first follower, hears that voice too. He sees 200 people sitting on the grass conforming to absolutely nothing, just sitting because sitting is what everyone else is doing and he sees one person on his feet, free, alive, having the time of his life, he makes a choice. Not a grand choice, not a political choice, just a human one. That looks better than this…. I'm going.

When he signals his friend. That's a big moment because his friend has been invited now, and he trusts the judgment of the person inviting him. He can still see that nobody else is joining. But his friend is there, so he joins too.Then a small group arrive. And that small group is the switch. Because now it's not one lunatic and a couple of others, It's a crowd. And the 200 people on the grass suddenly realise they're the ones missing out. Within seconds it's an avalanche. Everyone is on their feet. Everyone is dancing. The hillside transforms in under 3 minutes from a field of passive spectators into something joyful and alive and free.

You might think I'm taking this too far. It's not exactly a revolution, a bunch of people dancing at a festival. But it is, it's a revolution of suppressed feelings and desires. A revolution of breaking free from invisible barriers, a revolution of human spirit, filmed in under 3 minutes,

and nobody knows that first dancer's name. He wasn't trying to start anything. He was just being himself.

The entire argument of this book is that every institution, every messenger, every buried text, every 3,000 year old principle, comes down to that hillside. The move is simple: get up and dance. The noise is the voice that tells you to stay sitting. The first follower is the person who sees the truth, feels the pull, hesitates, and goes anyway.

That's all it takes. One person who gets up. One person who joins them.

The first thing is that the solution is not revolution in the traditional sense. Every violent revolution in history has followed the same pattern this book has described. Genuine grievance leads to a broad coalition. A charismatic leader emerges then the power consolidates. The revolution becomes the thing it replaced. France, Russia, Iran, Cuba. Over and over. The decent people who risked everything to make the change are the first to be discarded once the new regime is in place. Revolution doesn't break the cycle. It just restarts it with different faces at the top.

The second thing to understand is that the solution is not a leader. Every time we put our faith in a single person to fix the system, we hand them the power to become what we're fighting. The qualities that make someone good enough to deserve that trust are the same qualities that would prevent them from wanting it. Roughly 1 to 4 percent of the population are psychopathic or sociopathic. Those exact traits, ruthlessness, manipulation, charm without empathy, are advantages in climbing power structures. Decent people don't want those roles because the process requires becoming something they're not. The system doesn't attract the wrong people by accident, It's built to reward them.

But here's what does work. It has worked. It's been proven. Every time it has, the institution has had to give ground.

In 1903 Emmeline Pankhurst founded the Women's Social and Political Union because decades of polite campaigning for women's suffrage had achieved nothing. The suffragettes chained themselves to railings, smashed windows, set fire to postboxes, went on hunger strikes, and were force-fed in prison. Emily Davison stepped in front of the King's horse at the Epsom Derby and died. They were ridiculed, imprisoned, beaten and dismissed as hysterical. It took over 2 decades but in 1918 women over 30 got the vote, and in 1928 it was extended to all women over 21. The institution didn't grant equality because it had a change of heart. It granted it because the cost of refusing became higher than the cost of conceding.

In 1930 Gandhi walked 240 miles to the sea and picked up a handful of salt. The British had made it illegal for Indians to collect their own salt, a substance that falls from the sky and washes up on the shore, so that they could tax it. Gandhi's act was so simple it was absurd, and that was the point. 60,000 people were arrested. The violence was entirely on one side and the whole world could see it. Within 17 years British rule in India was over.

In 1955 Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She wasn't the first Black person to do so, but her act, and the 381 day bus boycott that followed,

hit the transport system where it hurt, in the wallet. The buses ran empty. The city lost revenue. The institution caved because the numbers didn't work any more.

In 1989 the Berlin Wall fell, not because of military force. Not because of sanctions, because ordinary people walked up to a wall that had divided a city for 28 years and said no more. The guards didn't shoot because they were outnumbered and because they were, in the end, the same people standing on the other side. Vaclav Havel, who had spent years in prison for refusing to pretend the system was working, became president of Czechoslovakia weeks later. The entire Soviet bloc collapsed not because it was defeated but because enough people simply stopped believing in it.

Here's the one I love the most, 1994 the Zapatistas in Mexico rose up on the day NAFTA came into force and could have tried to seize national power. Instead they said we don't want to run Mexico, we just want to govern ourselves. They built autonomous communities from scratch, their own schools, clinics, justice system and democratic governance, and maintained them for 30 years. Their principle was "lead by obeying," meaning the leaders serve the community, not the reverse. Leadership rotates so nobody holds power long enough to be corrupted. They proved that ordinary people with nothing can build a functioning society without any institution telling them how.

These examples have something in common: they didn't ask for permission. They didn’t wait for an institution to reform itself. Not one of them put their faith in a politician or a party or a programme. They saw what was wrong and they acted, and the institution had to respond because the alternative was to stand exposed in front of the whole world as exactly what it was.

But here's the thing that keeps nagging at me. Every one of those examples, as powerful as they were, was eventually absorbed. Women got the vote but the political system that excluded them for centuries is still run by the same types of people. India gained independence but the caste system persists and the country is now one of the most unequal on earth. The Berlin Wall fell but the wealth gap in former East Germany is still enormous.

So I'm going to be honest about what I think, and trust me when I say I have spent over 7 years thinking what's the solution to all these issues, going over and over potential outcomes again and again. So please stick with me, you got this far it would be a shame to not see the ending or as I like to think of it “the beginning”.

You may notice I haven't talked about politics, I haven't talked about many of the wars, the atrocities, the so-called leaders, this is intentional. We could discuss for years and years which system would be best and who would lead it and ultimately at this point I think we are beyond that.

I think the system we have now is so deeply and completely corrupted that reform isn't enough. An amputation is required. Not 10 years from now, not when the next election gives us someone slightly less bad. Now.

The first step is the simplest and the hardest. Acceptance. Accepting that what we have doesn't work, has never really worked, and isn't going to fix itself. Not because the people in it are all bad, most of them aren't, but because the structures themselves are designed to extract, to control, to reward the wrong behaviour and punish the right kind. Every chapter of this book has shown the same pattern across thousands of years. It doesn't change because it isn't supposed to change. It works exactly as intended, just not for you.

Once you accept that, something shifts. You stop waiting, you stop hoping the next job, the next holiday, the next election, the next policy, the next leader or guru will be the thing that helps. You stop putting your energy into propping up something you know is broken and you start asking a much simpler question. What do I actually need and how do I get it without them?

The answer, it turns out, is not that complicated. You need food. You need energy. You need shelter. You need community. You need your kids to learn things that actually matter. You need to know that when you're old or ill someone will be there. That's it. That's the list. And not one of those things requires a corporation, a government department or a billionaire to provide it. Every single one of them can be built locally, between people, from the ground up. Humans managed it for thousands of years before anyone told them they couldn't.

The Next step is learning. Not in a classroom, not from a curriculum designed by the same system you're walking away from, but from each other. How do you grow food? How do you generate your own energy? How do you look after your neighbours? How do you raise children who can think for themselves? How do you build something that doesn't need permission from above to exist? None of this is hidden knowledge. It's just knowledge that nobody taught you because teaching you to be self-sufficient doesn't generate profit for anyone.Then it’s simply a quiet withdrawal from the system, becoming non reliant on the institutions and not participating in something that leaves you at the mercy of the nutjobs in control.

What do I mean by withdrawal? I mean total co-ordinated withdrawal, I mean ensuring you are able to eat, have a roof over your head and have access and energy and community.

I mean you stop participating , that means not going to work, it means you stop spending, rent, mortgage, credit, loans ,tax, bills, consuming. You turn off the news , you close your social media, you go outside and you sit and you look inwards and find that person you once were, the one you are supposed to be , you pick up a book, you study a subject ,you connect with others who share your philosophy, you talk to others who are curious. You reach out for help , you offer help. You come up with solutions. You ask questions. You spend time with your family doing things you enjoy. You prepare but not just for you, for others too, even for your neighbours you can't stand , for best friends who think you have gone mad. When asked who's in charge, tell them that you are.

What happens when your house gets taken? What happens when the courts want their tax?

We do this together. Once we have learnt , discussed, coordinated and prepared. We stop participating together, when we are ready, when we have prepared and we're in a situation when we can help others. We do it on our terms, not the terms of a foreign Tyrannical government. If you're someone who reads this and thinks ill get myself ok then do it, you

may want to read the last few chapters again, self-sufficient doesn't mean self centered it means you are not reliant on industries. It only works when we come together.

Some may tomorrow and that's fine, that's their choice, we must be there to help everyone, if one person falls we all do.

Reaching out is not to start a movement, not to recruit followers, not to build another institution with another hierarchy and another set of rules. Just to find the other people who feel the same way. Because they're out there, millions of them, sitting on the grass watching, wanting to get up but thinking they're the only one. Society wants you to believe that. It wants you isolated. It wants you to think that questioning any of this makes you the problem, makes you odd, it will be called a cult, it will be ridiculed and attacked but when people come together, anything is possible. You can not break someone who wants nothing from the system.

Currently when people congregate it's on the system's terms, at its venues, spending its money, preferably with enough alcohol that the conversation stays shallow and the questions stay unasked. The isolation that many of us feel isn't an accident.

We live in an age where technology has become so advanced that we are on the brink of seeing entire industries automated out of existence. We are sitting and watching as jobs that humans have done for centuries are about to be replaced by an AI update. Lorry drivers, factory workers, call centre staff, accountants, paralegals, radiologists, even doctors and software engineers, all of it is heading the same way. And we have 2 options about how this plays out.

Option 1, we let it happen. We carry on as we are, with the same economic system that hands the profits of automation to a small number of shareholders while the people whose jobs disappear are told to retrain, to be more flexible, to find something else, to compete with each other for the scraps that are left. The gap between rich and poor reaches levels that have never been seen in the history of the world. A handful of people own the machines that do all the work, and everyone else fights over what's left of the human-only jobs until those go too. That's the path we're currently walking down.

Option 2, we stop engaging, we prepare for it . We use this technology for what it was always supposed to be for, making life simpler for humans so they can concentrate on the things that actually matter. Caring for each other. Sharing what we have. Raising children properly. Looking after the elderly. Growing food. Making things by hand for the joy of making them. Sitting in silence and finding inner peace. Reading, learning, creating, talking to each other. The things humans were doing before someone decided we all needed to spend 40 hours a week doing something we hate so we could afford to live in a house we're never in. We leave a handful of people with all the money in the world, they can have it, money becomes worthless when no one wants it.

There's a blueprint already. Someone saw what was coming decades ago and spent his entire life designing a system for it.

His name was Jacque Fresco. Born in Brooklyn in 1916 to immigrant parents, he grew up during the Great Depression and watched it shape him. He saw factories full of food and clothing and goods of every kind, all sitting there ready to be used, while people starved and slept on the streets outside. He couldn't make sense of it, the resources existed, the need existed. The thing in the middle stopping them from meeting was the money system.

He was almost entirely self-taught. He never finished high school, he worked as an aircraft designer, an industrial engineer, an inventor, an architectural designer, a research engineer. He held patents. He designed prefabricated houses, medical instruments, structural systems, and three-dimensional projection systems. He served in the US Army Air Force during the Second World War. He was, by any measure, a genuinely gifted technical mind operating across a dozen different fields at once.

But the thing he kept coming back to was the bigger question. Why, with all the technology humans had developed, were we still living in a system that produced poverty, war, scarcity and suffering on a massive scale when there was no real reason for any of it? In 1980 he founded a research centre on a 21 acre site in a small Florida town called Venus. Together with his partner Roxanne Meadows, he designed and built 10 buildings on that site over the following decades, models and prototypes of a different way of organising civilisation. He called it The Venus Project.

His core idea was something he named a Resource Based Economy. The principle is simple. The earth has more than enough resources to provide every single human being with food, shelter, healthcare, education, energy, clean water and a high standard of living, if those resources were managed intelligently and shared equitably instead of being rationed through money. Money, Fresco argued, was an artificial scarcity mechanism. It was invented at a time when resources genuinely were limited and humans needed a way to allocate them. We're not in that world any more. We have the technology, the energy, the materials and the knowledge to provide abundance. What we don't have is a system designed to deliver it. The system we have was designed to deliver profit to whoever owns the means of production, and abundance is actually bad for that system because abundance crashes prices.

His proposal was to redesign cities from the ground up around sustainability and automation. Renewable energy. Efficient transportation. Food grown locally. Housing built by automated systems. Healthcare and education available to everyone as a right, not a transaction. Machines doing the work that machines are good at, so humans could spend their time on the things only humans can do, creativity, relationships, learning, art, science, care. He wasn't proposing communism, he wasn't proposing socialism, he wasn't proposing any of the existing political labels. He was proposing that we step outside the entire framework of money and ownership and start asking what we actually want civilisation to look like when the technology to feed and house everyone already exists.

The criticism levelled at Fresco was always the same. It's utopian. It's unrealistic. People are too selfish for it to work. There would be no incentive to do anything. Who would take out the bins. The criticisms are almost always made by people who haven't actually engaged with what he was proposing, but more importantly, every single one of those criticisms assumes that humans are the way the current system has shaped them to be, and that they can't be

any other way. Fresco's whole argument was that human behaviour is largely a product of the environment humans grow up in. Put a child in a system that rewards competition, hoarding and selfishness, and you'll get an adult who competes, hoards and is selfish. Put that same child in a system that rewards cooperation, sharing and contribution, and you'll get a different adult. The cycle this book has described, the institution shaping the people who then perpetuate the institution, runs in both directions. We can choose what we put into it.

I'm not saying Fresco had every answer. Nobody does. There are plenty of practical questions about how a transition would work and what it would actually look like. But what Fresco gave us was a starting point, a serious, thoughtful, technically grounded vision of what civilisation could be if we used our technology in service of human wellbeing instead of in service of accumulating wealth for a tiny minority. He spent his entire life on it. He built models. He drew blueprints. He left behind books, films, lectures and a research centre that still operates today. The work is there. Anyone can read it. The Venus Project website is free.

The reason I'm including Fresco here is that the choice in front of us is the same choice that every chapter of this book has described. The signal has been delivered. Someone saw what was coming, told the truth about it, designed an alternative, and spent their life trying to share it. The question isn't whether the blueprint exists. It exists. The question is whether enough of us pay attention to it before the institution makes it irrelevant. Automation is coming whether we like it or not. The only question is whether we let it concentrate wealth and power into fewer hands than ever before in human history, or whether we use it to free ourselves to live the kind of lives the messengers have been telling us about for 3,000 years. Good thoughts. Good words. Good deeds. With the time and space to actually think those thoughts, speak those words, and do those deeds, instead of being too exhausted from work that a machine could do better.

www.pleasejudgemefairly.world Is completely free and it always will be. It's not a political party. It's not an organisation with a membership fee and a leadership structure. It's a place to find each other, to talk honestly, to share what you know, to help each other become self-sufficient, to withdraw quietly and peacefully, to organise around the simplest idea in the world: I want a better life, I want others to have a better life, and I'm willing to do something about it. That's it, no ulterior motive, no hidden agenda, no leader telling you what to think. Just people helping people, because that's what we've always done when the institutions weren't standing in the way.

It spreads the way every signal in this book has always travelled. Person to person. Not through social media campaigns or viral videos. One friend tells another. Some will laugh but others will listen. One conversation becomes 2, becomes 10, becomes a street, becomes a community. And at some point, quietly, without anyone quite being able to say when it happened, a small minority becomes a large minority, and a large minority can't be stopped.

We're not asking for anything, In fact it's the opposite. We just want to be left alone by a system that doesn't work. We don't want to overthrow it, we don't want to run it, we don't want to reform it. We just want to stop participating in it and we want something honest in its place. The system only has power because WE keep showing up, the moment enough

people stop showing up, the whole thing has to recalculate. And every calculation it runs comes back to the same answer: the maths doesn't work any more..

You might ask why I wrote this anonymously? The answer is because I haven't done anything, I've simply laid out just some of the work that others have done. Thousands of people have done their bit and its cost them everything.

My name doesn't matter, it's what you choose to do next that does.

Do I have all the answers? No, of course not. But that's what communities do, they discuss and create solutions. There will be people out there who are highly skilled in a variety of important things, while others might feel they have nothing to contribute. I disagree. Everyone has something to offer, no matter how big or small the input, and once we understand the core principle of treating everyone as equals, those skills and abilities are given room to shine.

I didn't intend to write a book. It just happened, the best explanation I can give is I can no longer have mundane conversations about sport about weather and where am I'm going on holiday, I can't do it when the world around me is falling apart, I cant explain to someone in 10 mins all the things in this book that have been playing on my mind for over 15 years

What I do know is that everything in my life now makes sense. I had to be brought up in a religion, my parents' house had to be repossessed, I had to break the law, I had to party and take drugs, I had to meet my wife who at 21 was politically savvy and explained politics to me. I had to think I knew everything to understand I knew nothing. I had to start a business to feel the complete and utter exhaustion, mentally and physically, and to finally realise that everything is wrong. I'm not saying I'm a messenger. I have had no divine revelation. I've just spent over 40 years being given lesson after lesson and one day decided to start writing it down. The message is so ridiculously simple but most of us still can’t see it.

I also know that if a million people read this or just one person does, whoever was meant to read it will. It might be next week, it might be 10 years from now, but you'll know. Because it will make complete sense. Just as it has with me.

On the edge of the Sahara, in a place most people will never see, a sandstone cliff stretches for 150 kilometres across the dry plains of central Mali. At its base, clustered in nooks and crannies carved by centuries of wind and patience, are the villages of the Dogon people.

They went to the cliffs to survive. For almost 1,000 years they had been hunted, raided and pressured to abandon their beliefs. Jihads swept through West Africa demanding conversion. The slave trade consumed millions from the surrounding lowlands. The Dogon climbed higher, built their homes in places nobody else could reach, and kept their traditions alive in the one place the institutions couldn't follow them.

What they preserved there is remarkable. A belief in one God, called Amma, who is neither male nor female but both, who holds the world together not through force but through balance. Divine beings called the Nommo who periodically taught humanity the principles of civilisation. Ethics built on harmony, on the sacred power of words, on the principle that false accusation is the worst sin and forgiveness the highest act.

No heaven or hell to threaten or bribe with. No institutional hierarchy demanding obedience. Just a community preserving ancient knowledge, passed from elder to child, generation after generation, on a cliff face beyond the reach of anyone who might destroy it.

In 2020, geneticists at the University of California analysed the DNA of West African populations, including the Mende of Sierra Leone, the Yoruba and Esan of Nigeria, and the Gambian people. They found something that rewrote the human story. Hidden in the genes of these living people was the genetic fingerprint of an unknown human species, a ghost population that split from the human family tree up to a million years ago and then, at some point in the deep past, interbred with the ancestors of modern West Africans. Up to 19 percent of their DNA comes from a species that has never been found in the fossil record. No bones. No tools. No trace except the code written inside living people, carried silently for hundreds of thousands of years.

The ethical signal preserved on the Dogon cliffs, and the genetic signal preserved in West African DNA. Both ancient beyond measuring. Both survived despite every attempt to erase them. Both invisible to anyone who wasn't looking.

The people of the lowlands were not as fortunate as the Dogon. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, roughly 12.5 million West Africans were captured and shipped across the Atlantic. Nearly half came from the coastal regions between Senegal and Nigeria. The Mende, the Yoruba, the Igbo, the Esan. Roughly 2 million died during the crossing. Those who survived were stripped of their names, their languages, their religions, their family structures, their identities.

But something survived the crossing that the slavers couldn't take. The genetic signal went with them, written into their bodies and fragments of the cultural signal went too, hidden in the memories of enslaved people, adapted and disguised to survive, emerging in new forms: Vodou in Haiti, Candomble in Brazil, gospel music in the American South, the blues, jazz, and eventually a sound that would carry a message of love and resistance to every corner of the world through a speaker in Kingston, Jamaica.

The institution tried to sever the signal through the most sustained and brutal system of oppression in human history. It still came back.

On 27 April 1927, a girl was born in Marion, Alabama.Her father owned his own land, which was rare for a Black family in the Deep South. His first cotton gin was mysteriously burned down. He built another one. That was the family she came from, people who refused to be defeated. The girl was gifted. Music ran through her, voice and violin, and by 15 she was directing her church choir. She grew up walking to school while white children rode in buses paid for by her parents' taxes, sitting in the balcony at the cinema while white children sat below, absorbing the daily message that she was worth less than they were. She didn't believe it. Something in her wouldn't accept it. She studied at Antioch College in Ohio, one of 6 Black students, and immediately joined the NAACP, the Race Relations Committee, the Civil Liberties Committee. She wasn't waiting for someone to show her the path. She was already walking it. She won a scholarship to the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, studying concert singing. She was brilliant, driven, and deeply sceptical of organised religion. The last thing she was looking for was a preacher.

A friend introduced her to a young doctoral student from Atlanta, a Baptist minister's son studying theology at Boston University. She wasn't impressed. He was short, he was a reverend at a time when she doubted her own religious beliefs. On their first date, he proposed. She said no. He asked for a second date. She said “maybe”, she had seen something in him, not his title or his religion, his mind and his commitment to justice. They married in 1953 at her family's home in Alabama and moved to Montgomery, where he took a position as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. What followed changed the world. She marched beside him, organised with him, raised 4 children while their home was bombed by white supremacists, performed Freedom Concerts to raise money for the movement, and pushed her husband further than he could ever have gone alone. She was against the Vietnam War before he was. She saw the connections between racism, poverty and militarism before the movement had language for it.

When the movement's most important moment came, the March on Washington in 1963, she was told she couldn't walk beside her husband. No wives could march, no woman could make a major speech. The institution, even the civil rights movement itself, sidelined the woman who was instrumental in building it.

She stayed. She continued. She never stopped.

On 4 April 1968, her husband was shot and killed in Memphis, Tennessee. 5 years earlier he had given one of the most important speeches in American history, a speech about a dream, a dream that people would be judged not by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character. The night before he was killed, he gave his last speech, standing before a crowd in Memphis and telling them he had been to the mountaintop, that he had seen the promised land, that he might not get there with them, but that it didn't matter now.

4 days later, she led the march he was supposed to lead. She didn't collapse. She didn't retreat. She founded the King Center. She campaigned for 15 years to establish a national holiday in his honour. She succeeded. She spoke out for LGBTQ+ rights, against apartheid

in South Africa, against poverty, against war. She expanded the message to everyone, every community, every struggle. Her name was Coretta Scott King

She spent nearly 40 years carrying the signal forward after the messenger she helped create was killed.

In 2011, ancestry testing through her son Martin Luther King III's mitochondrial DNA, which passes unchanged from mother to child, confirmed that Coretta Scott King shared maternal ancestry with the Mende people of Sierra Leonehe, the same Mende people who were among the most heavily targeted by the transatlantic slave trade.

A lineage running from an unknown ancient species, through West Africa, across the Atlantic in a slave ship, through generations of oppression, produced a woman who carried a core message further than almost anyone in modern history. A woman whose ancestry connects to the deepest roots of the human family tree, who spent her life saying the simplest thing there is to say:

Treat every person as your equal. Fight injustice. Don't grovel. Don't hate. Just love.

She didn't know the Dogon existed. She probably had never heard of Zoroaster. She couldn't have told you about the Gathas or the Nag Hammadi Library or the Teacher of Righteousness. But she lived by the same principle that every tradition, every messenger, every suppressed voice in 3,000 years of human history has been trying to tell us.

Good thoughts. Good words. Good deeds.

When lights around are dimming and the path to you was lost,

I trod that path before you, In sun and rain and frost.

The kingdom is inside you, Just as it's always been.

One more step, I beg you, Your power has been seen.

You're closer than you realise, though it may seem impossible to see.

I'll be there waiting for you, with others, not just me.

G.thoughts